

Epiphany 3
24/1/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 7:29-32a

Psalm 62

Mark 1:14-20

As if, as if not.

In a sentence

The fullness of our lives is not in the things we have but in the freedom of God's children in all circumstances

Chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians is the 'marriage chapter', and many people count it among their least favourite parts of Paul. What we have just heard is Paul's summary of the teaching he has been giving about marriage in response to questions which had come from the Corinthian church:

... from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.[NRSV]

It's tempting to read Paul as having no real interest in marriage or other worldly experiences. It is as though he says: 'you might *have* to marry, you might be moved to mourning *or* rejoicing, you might *need* to acquire possessions, but these are only surface things – treat them "as if" they were not really there, as if they did not really matter.' This does not do well for his reception today, for ours is an age which relishes experience, which encourages immersion in all the things of the world.

The discomfort Paul's apparent attitude to the world might cause is compounded when he gives his reason for thinking this way: 'the present form of the world is passing away'. Even if we might make sense of the teaching to live 'as if' we had no dealings with the world, it's hard to take seriously now Paul's strong conviction that the end of the world is imminent, that the living 'as though' we had no dealings with the world was really a calling only for a small length of time before the end. We cannot pretend that we don't expect to have a long life and to die before there is any 'end of the world' to deal with. Add to that the apparent world-hating tenor of the teaching and Paul is easily dismissed here as simply out of touch – even dangerously so.

Yet, to dismiss Paul as a religious ascetic is to miss the point of what he says here. He encourages the Corinthians to live 'as if' they had no dealings with the things of the world, not to preserve them from perceived 'impurities' of the world, but so that they may be *free in* the world.

In the chapter prior to this one, Paul quotes back to the Corinthians their own words: 'all things are lawful for us' (6.12), with which he actually seems to agree. And yet he qualifies that agreement with the observation that 'not all things are beneficial' and 'I will not be dominated by anything'.

It is perhaps this second comment which gets us closest to the heart of the matter. Paul's concern is not merely moral but pastoral – what is best for human beings, to enable them to live freely and without anxiety in the world? How can we live free from domination? Out of questions such as these, he puts to us that many of the things we think are expressions of our freedom are, in fact, simply enslavements.

In the matter of marriage, Paul indicates that he personally thinks celibacy the better way to go. Yet, marriage in itself is not wrong, and it is better that we marry than be dominated and distracted by not being married. It's almost a policy of 'harm minimisation', and it applies as much to the other normal and permissible things he lists as it does to our human relationships.

'Let those who be mourn be as if they did not' is not to say don't be sad, but that grief can become an all-consuming thing which we allow to dominate us to the detriment of our own well-being and the well-being of others.

'Let those who rejoice be as if they did not' is not to say don't be happy when things go your way, but don't be distracted by an expectation that they will or ought always to go as you wish. Do not be consumed by the world's failure to serve you as you would like.

'Let those who buy be as if they had not possessions' is not to say that we ought not to own anything, but that our things or lack of things are not what make us righteous or worthy, and are quite capable of enslaving us and suppressing the fullness of life which comes with the call of God.

To live 'as if' is not necessarily to live *without* – without marriage, or joy or mourning or possessions, or whatever. It is to allow these things to be material for God's working of grace in our lives, and not to let them dominate or limit us or our possibilities in Christ. When what we have and experience is had and experienced in the grace of God, then it sets us free.

Living this way becomes a possibility when we see it achieved by another. We cannot say with Paul that we think the world is *about* to end. Yet we can agree with him that, in Jesus, we have seen the world *come* to an end with the drawing near of God's kingdom in the person of Jesus. In the life and ministry of Jesus, the world comes to the end of its skewed power over us. In him we see one who lives completely in and through the events which take place around him – good and bad – and yet one whose living through these events is coloured with light from a different source and a different calling. Jesus doesn't withdraw from the world, or fear it, but embraces it in its transitory character as the sphere in which God acts, to bring about a end of our story which no one has yet heard or seen or perceived.

Living 'as if' one were or were not rejoicing, does or does not have possessions, is living which allows God to be the distraction from such things when necessary, rather than allowing those things to be a distraction from God. This is Christian freedom *from* the world in itself, and *for* the world and God.

With the Corinthians we can agree that all things *are* given to us in Christ – only we should not allow ourselves to be dominated or lorded over by anything other than the Lord himself, who does not dominate but sets free.

To get a little more concrete for a moment, at least so far as our life together goes: what would it mean for us in twelve or twenty-four months' time if – as might be the case – we have moved on and no longer have all this or anything comparable but *lived and*

worshipped and served together as though we did? We can test our answer to that question by asking another: What would it mean for us to live *now* 'as though' we had no suite of buildings such as this, even as we continue live within and enjoy them? *Are* we more because of what we have? *Will* we be less if we do not have it? The joy and the grief will be what they will be, but they are also not quite the heart of the matter.

So it is for any such thing in our common or personal lives. Our lives and all that fills them are given us 'as if' they were ours. Through God in Christ they become *truly* ours to take up, or to put down according to Christ's call.

It is God who takes what seems to be the mere givenness of things in our lives and makes them the means by which we might discover Christ's call to us and live our lives in renewed freedom.

May we, then, discover in God and his Christ such a freedom to take up or to put down life's options in love and desire, in grief and joy, that we may conformed to the likeness of Jesus and be our richest selves in all that is given us.
