

Living in the in-between times: 1 Corinthians

7.17-24

In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

The Apostle Paul's world view was shaped by the story of momentous historical events which he believed to be significant moments when God acted in the world on a dramatic scale.

Prominent among these turning points in history were God's call on Abraham, God's liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the exile of the people of God and their subsequent return from exile.

Now, added to these events was an even greater one; the biggest game changer of them all; the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and His resurrection. By this event humanity was reconciled with God, freed once and for all from the slavery of sin so that we may all live with God through the risen Christ.

And then there was the event to come when God's rule would finally be established on earth.

Paul considers himself now to be living in a kind of in-between time that lies between these two latter game-changing events and he wants to tell his fellow Christians in Corinth how they are to live in this time that lies in between.

Both events are moments of liberation and yet many people in Corinth still

lived in conditions of slavery. The crucifixion meant that God and humanity were reconciled in a new way but many members of the church, through their circumcision, still bore the sign of an old and now redundant way to be reconciled with God while other members of the church remained uncircumcised. The state that people found themselves in did not fit with the liberation that Paul proclaimed.

In particular, how were slaves meant to cope with their day-to-day lives as slaves if the whole of humanity was set free?

Paul's advice is to urge slaves to remember that they are in fact free. Their enslaved state does not define who they are because they are in fact a freed person belonging to God. They are, therefore, to continue to live their lives with God, confident about the liberation that is to come.

These words of Paul's have sometimes been twisted to persuade slaves to accept their slavery on the basis that because they are enslaved it must be that this is the life that God has assigned them. 'Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned' (1 Cor 7:17).

This self-serving interpretation of these words by slave owners and their apologists misses the clear message of liberation when Paul writes, 'Whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord.' (1 Cor 7:22).

One can only imagine how these words must have sustained people through the centuries who have endured lives dominated by oppression that they could not practically do anything about. They endured knowing that they were a freed person belonging to the Lord.

We still live in this in between time; after the crucifixion and before the coming of God's Kingdom on earth. These words which have sustained others before us may be taken by us as a means to build up our resilience and ability to endure also. Because most people today still have to endure injustice and oppression that they cannot do anything about right now and so they have to cling onto an image of being a person who belongs to God so that they can endure their suffering with their identity and self-worth intact.

As the lockdown tightens again, we are again faced with the prospect that life will get more difficult for us all. The talk is of months. The test and trace system is still not in place at the level we need. A future date for the roll out of vaccinations is unclear. The percentage of people in this country who have the antibodies is still very small and, in any case, we are not sure how much protection they will give us. So we may be facing many months of loneliness, financial anxiety and disruption of routines. We miss our loved ones. What about Christmas? What will Christmas be like? We have need of resilience. We will need to endure.

And yet people have endured worse than this.

And for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us, what sustained them was their faith that, even as their suffering seemed to go on and on, they were free; a freed person belonging to the Lord.

May this faith sustain us also as it has sustained others before us.

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