

25 October 2009

Sunday 30B [Off RCL]

Sermon notes on Ephesians 5. 1-20

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On a quick reading our Ephesians text this morning is one of those which might serve as a caricature of what some believe the church to stand for: no sex – or at least, not too much sex – and no alcohol – or at least, not too much of that either! For this perception the church itself can take some credit (blame), but quite apart from the emphases the church might have made in the past, it is easy to hear the moral injunctions heard in this text as just that – simple *moral* injunctions.

There is nothing wrong with morality, of course, and Paul is quite right to point us away from such behaviour as he does, but in a social context such as ours, simply stating the “do’s” and “don’ts” of a so-called “Christian” life is not going to do anyone any good. “Morality” tends to be for us very much about what we do, or don’t *do*. Everyone agrees, of course, that what we do matters – to us or to others. But “doing” is for our society something of a mantra. We are activists – or “inactivists”, as the case may be; but in either case what we do or don’t do is more important than what we *are*. Or, more precisely, what we imagine ourselves to “be” is *free* – with freedom here being understood to be a freedom from constriction *for* doing. That is, we strive to be, or assert ourselves to be, “free” to do as we wish.

In the two particular moral concerns Paul focuses upon here – sexual practice and hard drinking – it is easy to hear moral injunctions which have their force in denying us freedom to do as we wish with “our” bodies. Yet not merely prohibition is active here but, more profoundly, Paul is working out an understanding of the human person entirely different from that which prevailed then, and prevails for us now. Much of the ethical teaching which features in the second half of Ephesians serves very well as simple moral instruction. But we’ve been looking particularly at how these texts might declare more than merely moral precepts, given the preamble of the first half of Paul’s letter. Paul’s concern in the first half of the letter was not primarily what we do but what we are – who we are, and whose we are. What he says about sexual practice and hard drinking, then, has to do with our very humanity and its depths, and not merely with what is and is not “permissible” according to the moral fashion of a particular society.

In relation to sex, the salient point of the biblical understanding, contrary to the dominant understanding today, is not that we *have* bodies, but that we *are* bodies. The difference is subtle, but very important. To *have* a body is somehow to be separated from it, somehow for the “real” me to dwell within my body so that whatever happens to my body doesn’t quite happen to “me”.

But this is not the understanding behind Paul’s exhortations here. While we are quite liberal these days about what we might do with our bodies, we remain very concerned that our stated intentions – our spoken promises or intentions – are honoured. The importance of “telling the truth” about what we intend has not been eroded with our so-called liberation of sexuality. We still recognise the need for reliability, because we depend upon each other for tomorrow to be a safe and secure place, and it is promises which bind us together until tomorrow. In our deeper relationships, one way or another, to this or that degree, I promise to be “there” for you, with you, beside you, in the future.

But for the Scripture it is not different in what we do with our bodies, if our bodies are not merely appendages to our minds but are also somehow “us” in our entirety. In the scriptural understanding of the human person sex, as an expression of one type of a deeper human relationship, is just such a kind of promise-making, a way of offering of myself to another not only for now but also for later. For, contrary to the modern mind-body split, it is indeed our whole selves which the Scripture understands to be caught up in sex and not “just” the bodies.

If this is the case, then sexual promiscuity is not simply a transgression against some moral code which happens to be in place but becomes a matter of *deceptiveness*. What I offer is not really myself, but something which is merely an appendage (my body) – perhaps even something I think I can afford to lose and still be “myself”. Alternatively, on this understanding, what I would *ask* of another in sexual promiscuity is not really your self and the ongoing demands you might make of me, but “only” your body. Ethicist Michael Banner remarks, “Causal sex is, one supposes, a bit like a casual remark – you did not really mean anything by it and it is not to be

taken at all seriously.”<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the sense of intimacy and closeness it might seem to promise, the “feel good” approach to sex-on-demand is more a matter of denying myself and the one I am with, at the deeper level of the being and needs of each of us. Paradoxically, from the point of view of Scripture, the contemporary “celebration” of our “embodiment” through sexual liberation is actually a denial of our bodies as really, in the end, actually being *us*.

Simply lamenting contemporary sexual mores as somehow being “wrong” – the kind of lament heard often enough in the churches – isn’t going to get us to the heart of the matter, especially in a context in which wrong and right is simply a matter of what we *do*, and in which we are culturally oriented towards being free to do anything which, we imagine, “doesn’t hurt anyone else”.

The matter of hard drinking, and drunkenness in particular, is not much different in Paul’s mind. As bad as the social impact of drunkenness is for families and the victims and drunken violence and driving, Paul’s focus here is on the one who drinks him- or herself to excess. Perhaps working a bit of a pun he draws a contrast between filling ourselves with strong spirits and being filled with the Spirit of God. Here not so much the body as the inner self is denied, and replaced with something else – a different spirit.

Not merely what we do but what we are, and how we are to become that kind of creature – these are Paul’s interests in his moral teaching. On both the simple moral reading, and the deeper theological one I’ve suggested, the teaching looks the same – don’t be sleeping around (whether in reality or in your head – cf. Matthew 5.27f) and don’t be getting drunk. But only on the basis of something like the theological preamble in the first part of the letter is there a firm foundation for understanding *why* this way of living may be important: we are made for each other, in the wholeness of ourselves as spirited-bodies, and living which denies the body-and-spirit which we are for ourselves and for those around us is living which denies our the very truth we long to be.

Moral teaching by itself says only “No”. In a world where we know ourselves only by our freedom to act as we see fit, moral codes are at best heard as one particular set of options for how to live, and we ought not to be surprised that we all pick and choose among the options as it suits us. But if there is a “No” spoken in specifically *Christian* moral teaching – informed by the theology and understanding of the human

person which Paul has worked so hard to lay out before he gets to his moral teaching – such a “No” is spoken only because there is a much louder “Yes” which has also been spoken.

This “Yes” is an affirmation of both our spirits and our bodies as fundamental to what we are. It is the “Yes” which affirms the “resurrection of the body” – our bodies in the Body of Christ – whatever that might ultimately look like. This “Yes” declares that even what seems to threaten us most – the loss of our bodies in death – does not have ultimate sway. The “Yes” of the gospel is the affirmation of God’s faithfulness to the world as he has created it, not simply as spirits encased in flesh from which they must escape, nor as isolated bodies within which our spirits are fundamentally separated from the spirits of others but created as truly spirited bodies which have their fullest life when the relationships of hearts and minds match appropriately the relationships of bodies.

The “Yes” God speaks is the promise of the Spirit in the risen Body of Christ; ours it is simply to pray for the enlivening of our bodies and spirit through what God has promised, and to look for that new life in proper and ordered relationships which reflect God’s own faithfulness to body and to spirit.

By the grace of God, may such lives continue to grow and be strengthen among all God’s people. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Banner, (Christian ethics and contemporary moral problems, p275)