

1 November 2009

Sunday 31B/All Saints [off RCL]

Sermon notes on Ephesians 5.21-6.9

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Available from www.auburnuc.org.au and
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Our text this morning touches upon three different types of human relationships: those of husbands and wives, parents and their children, and masters and slaves. For reasons having to do with our particular social and political context, informed as it has been by more than a century of reflection on the role of power in social dynamics, it is the first set of relationships which seems to interest us most in our hearing of Paul here. Following a broad and general "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ", Paul then seems to go very conservative in his domestic politics: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord...", reinforcing the point with a discussion of the relationship of Christ as lord over the subordinate church. We all know the problems a bland reading of a text like this in isolation from its context raises. The question is, do these problems remain when the broader context is taken into account? Can Paul be "salvaged" here?

To approach an answer to that question, it will help to look at what Paul says to all three groups together. We variously find strengths and weaknesses in Paul's moral exhortations here, there is an important point to note about whom Paul addresses in each exhortation and, in particular, whom he addresses *first*. In each case – the marital bond, the parental one and the bond of master and slave, Paul addresses what we might call the "subordinate" partner in the relationship – subordinate, that is, in the terms of *that* social context.

This is very important, and we need to sit with it for a moment. Unlike the dominant ethical systems in the Greek world of the time – and Stoicism in particular – Paul addresses first not the stronger or "superior" partner but the lesser one. The novelty here is that this teaching recognises, unlike its contemporary Greek counterpart, that in fact women and children and slaves have a moral agency which matters – which can make a difference in human relations. That is, Paul recognises that these have a capacity to affect the type and the quality of relationship they are participating in.

This may strike us today as being quite glaringly obvious – *of course* they have such a moral capacity. But we have also to allow that we are, ourselves, the *fruits* of a couple of thousand years of this kind of ethical thinking.¹ The true

force of this morning's reading is not to be found in ways it might seem to miss the point of *our* broader assumptions about the moral and ethical life, but in the way in which it missed the point – or *challenged* the assumptions – of the dominant morality of its own day. If we are to trust our historians at all, then the past *is* like a different country where people do (and think) things differently.²

If there is something valuable to be discovered from texts like this one it is not from a simplistic reading of the apparent meaning of the words, but from a recognition of the kind of way it would have sounded to those who first heard it. And here three points are important. The first is what I've already noted, which is that Paul begins with the "lesser" party in these relationships at that time. The second point is that it is significant that Paul actually raises these matters. In a time when writing materials were expensive and fewer words were better than more, it is noteworthy that Paul thinks it necessary to address these relationships, beginning with the subordinate partners in each relationship. In last week's reading he addressed the question of sexual morality and hard drinking, but not simply because these are typical "Christian" concerns. They were only worth Paul's writing about them if he thought that there might be a problem with such things in the community to which he was writing. You don't tell people who aren't doing something to stop it! This applies also to the possibility of problems in these types of relationships. The call to subordination doesn't make sense unless there has apparently been a temptation to *insubordination*.³ Paul speaks here to those who might seem to be stepping out of line. But, more positively, if this is the case then Paul calls wives, children and slaves – *in this context* – to subordination not out of sheer conservatism but because the gospel has already proclaimed the dignity of these categories of people and so threatened the prevailing patterns. It is the freedoms brought by the gospel to such categories of people which Paul seeks to redirect into socially *stabilising*, rather than *destabilising*, consequences.

If the first point to note is that Paul addresses the lesser partners in our relationships first, and the second is that this is because the gospel itself begins to the disrupt received social order, then the third point to note is one which has been

¹ Although this is not to suggest that we are any more "moral" than our predecessors on account of this knowledge.

² L.P.Hartley, *The Go-Between*.

³ J.H.Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* – a source drawn on several times for thoughts in the present sermon.

implicit in the language I've been using to describe the type of relationship Paul encourages here. Our English translation this morning ran like this: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ". Paul's meaning throughout the passage, however, is better given if "be subject" is translated "be subordinate". The English "be subject to", or "submit to" suggests a passivity and social conservatism which honours neither Paul's thought nor the gospel more generally.⁴ Subordination has to do with an acceptance of a particular order of things, while at the same time changing *the nature* of that order through our acceptance it.

Hence, Paul contrasts a simple understanding of marriage as a power-differential with an understanding of marriage based upon the relationship between Christ and the church – one subordinate to the other, but that other "giving himself up" for the first. The parental relationship is not simply one of authority of one partner over another, but has with it a "promise" (6.3 – "...so that it may go well with you..."). The master-slave relationship is recast in terms of the common relationship both slave and master have to their divine master to whom both are subordinate.

There is, then, almost certainly not any prescription as to how the partners in these relationships are to relate to one another, or to how we might relate to each other in such relationships today. *Were* that the case, then Paul has done us a great disservice by not listing every other possible type of human relationship, that we might be able to order our lives around such a fixed moral code.

But Paul is not talking about wives and husbands, children and parents – or, at least, not yet speaking to *us* who might fit into those categories today. He is, rather, illustrating how, the gospel might take shape, given the realities of any particular social space in very specific relationships, whatever they may be, and however they may have changed through time. The pathos of utopian visions of how things "ought" to be is their naïveté regarding the realities of human relationships. The point is not that you need "God" in order to construct a moral system that will work; it is that ethical systems do not work in bringing peace, especially those which begin with our "rights". There is no such thing as a balance of power in human relationships; the "upper hand" is always to be found somewhere – whether it is in an institutionalised patriarchy such as when Paul wrote, or in the dynamics of one particular family

today in which the power is ordered in some quite different way.

Rather than the utopian approach, Paul declares to us that, indeed, we all have a common dignity before a common Lord. This being the case, the particular shape of our lives will come to matter less than might previously have been the case. Willing subordination of ourselves to this or that prevailing order, not out of weakness but in order to change that order by being changed ourselves, this is the form of Christian discipleship. We would do well to wonder whether it could be any other way, if we are to be followers of one such as Jesus.

As with Paul's other ethical teaching in this part of Ephesians, we lose Christian clarity by treating what he says as simply moral code for all time and all circumstances. In some cases the instruction may not vary, but in most the purpose or the motivation certainly does. We are to be towards each other as God has been towards us. In terms of what Paul has already said in the letter, this involves not more law and regulation in our relationships with each other, but an "abolishing" of such law,⁵ and replacing it with a giving of self which brings peace by other means.

This is not a pacifism before the injustices of the world, nor a refusal to participate in the work to be done to see injustice named and rooted out. It is not reason for people to remain in dangerous and abusive relationships when there is opportunity for escape. The call for justice and security for all remains – if only, in the end, to draw to our attention that fact that we cannot achieve it on our own.

Rather than denying the need for justice, Paul's ethic reflects a confidence that, in the meantime between our present experience of injustice and the restoration of all things which is to come, God's means of bringing justice may be present in us through the way we relate to each other.

The "saints" who we mark today on "all saints" are not those who did the right thing, but those to whom something justifying, or "righting"⁶ has been done. Their lives are marked by this, and by the way in which how God has dealt with them affects how they deal with each other. This is the calling to each one of us as wives and husbands, as children and parents, as the powerful and the less so: to imitate God as beloved children, living in love, dealing with each other in tenderness, kindness and forgiveness (4.32-5.2).

⁴ Note, for example, Paul's suggestion to Philemon that keeping Onesimus as a slave might contradict Philemon's Christian faith.

⁵ See 2.11-22 and sermon of July 19 2009.

⁶ See sermon of October 18 2009

This is where God begins with us, that we might begin in the same way with each other.

By the grace of God may such peace and justice continue to develop among us as we grow in understanding of what God is making of us, and how.

Amen.