

TUESDAY COMMUNION
"Paul and Human Relationships"

Hymn:

Reading: Romans 1. 24- 32

Prayers:

I was tempted to give this passage a miss. Of all the things Paul wrote these are words which still have the power to cause massive disruption in the church and the world. Most publicly, the Anglican Communion is finding it hard to hold together its conservative and liberal wings.

The Methodist Church in Britain has a form of words, the so-called "Derby Resolutions", to try and hold the church together on the issue of homosexuality with which neither side of the debate is particularly happy! In the midst of such much anxiety what can Colin possibly say which will not add petrol to the fire.

It would be helpful if we could summon St. Paul and ask him to sit before us whilst we ask him questions.

I think the first question I would like to ask Paul would be this: "Tell me about how as a Jew and a Christian what is the right sphere in which human beings may engage in sexual activity." I suspect that his answer would have been fairly straight-forward. He would have replied that the Jewish scriptures wrote about marriage as being the proper sphere within which human beings should engage in sexual activity.

I would then have wanted to ask him what it was about the Greek and Roman world which caused him to write with such vehemence. I wonder what he'd have said? Certainly, Paul lived at a time when in places there were sexual relationships between old men and young men which we would today condemn as wrong and give them the name of paedophilia.

Certainly there was also often an easy acceptance of sexual relationships, heterosexual and homosexual, which had little to do with love or loyalty but with cheap thrills and easy satisfaction.

My third question might have been to ask him what he made of the words he'd written had been used over the last 2,000 years and especially in the modern world.

At this point Paul is silent. It's an unfair question because we all write in the context of our world and what is happening in it! So what follows is Colin and not Paul!

First, Paul is concerned with the way people in his world "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator". What he believes is happening in his world and what may well seem true of our every generation since is that we tend to ask, "What do I want for myself?" rather than, "What does God want of me?"

Secondly, Paul is not obsessed with sex. He is passionately concerned with good relationships and with the tendency for people who live lives which are dominated by their own desires to create relationships which are destructive.

That long list of human vices from “murder” to “malice,” “envy and gossip” to being “haughty and ruthless” is about getting our relationships with each other badly wrong. Paul sees all that creates human division as a direct result of our failure to be open to the God of love who has a good purpose for us and his world.

Finally, Paul, like Jesus, often showed the capacity to use the Scriptures creatively.

Time and again he is concerned with how we show God’s love in the whole of our lives. He tries to express that in the context of his world and produces some remarkable statements which challenge many of the old preconceptions.

“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

For what it’s worth, I suspect that, from what he writes elsewhere, he would speak today about human self-control, not living just for what we want for ourselves but honouring God through holding back from what we might desire.

On the other hand, he would surely speak about how good relationships honour God through their love and loyalty, gentleness and faithfulness. I also dare to believe that he would recognise what was not revealed to him 2,000 years ago. We human beings are different from each other and that there are different contexts within which our sexual relationships can bring joy both to God and to those who worship the Creator through the love they have for one another.

Amen.