

Trinity 7

Colossians 1.1.14

There is nothing I love more than engaging with Holy Scripture. My formative years as a Christian were spent listening to sermons and talks that systematically expounded whole books of the bible and so I always rub my hands with glee when our lectionary allows us to read through great chunks of Scripture for several weeks in a row. And such a time is now: for the next four weeks we are reading through some hearty pieces of Paul's letter to the Colossians and we have begun today with the first 14 verses.

Over my years of reading and studying Scripture, though, two things have become real challenges to receiving it, as I was always taught to, as the word of God. One of these is to do with specific ethical teachings of the bible that we struggle with today – more of that later – but the first challenge is brought by the work of biblical scholarship and criticism, which raises questions like 'who wrote this?' How historically accurate is it? And does that matter for receiving it as God's word for today?

The letter begins:

'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.'

The scholars have asked: was this really written by Paul? It was fashionable 20 or 30 years ago to doubt it. We were told that for reasons of style, vocabulary and theology this letter and others must have been written later and their authors were second generation, the spiritual offspring of Paul, his successors in church leadership, writing in his name and as it were with his apostolic authority. That doesn't necessarily invalidate it as Holy Scripture – it may well, for instance, have been an understood and recognised literary device – but to our generation at least it requires a bit of explaining and a bit of mental adjustment.

I'm glad to say however that the pendulum of biblical scholarship has rather swung back since my days of studying these things at theological college and there are many more scholars arguing that the letter really is written by Paul – or, to be more accurate they have noticed that it begins

'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.'

There are in fact two authors. Just as, we may add, the letter to the Philippians begins:

'Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints... in Philippi...'

1 & 2 Thessalonians begin with Paul, Silvanus and Timothy.

2 Cor begins also with Paul and Timothy.

1 Cor starts: 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.'

Scholars have begun to think that the second-named person might have been just an add-on name. Maybe they actually helped to write the letters. Maybe Paul's great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13

– faith, hope, love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love’ – maybe it wasn’t Paul’s hymn, maybe it was written by Sosthenes....

There are several references in Paul’s letters to the fact that he didn’t actually physically write them at all – last verse of Colossians: ‘I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains.’

There’s another reason for doubting that this letter is of a later date than Paul’s so called genuine letters. It is written to the Christians of Colossae, a place we gather from the text Paul hadn’t visited but was evangelised by his Gentile co-worker Epaphras. Now Colossae, like the nearby city Laodicea was in Turkey in the Lycus valley; because of underground rivers and volcanic springs it was unstable territory, prone to earthquakes. One such hit the region in the year 60AD (when Paul would have still been alive). Laodicea was rebuilt, but Colossae wasn’t. It became a shadow of its former self and, over centuries, petered out. It is now an archaeological site that has never been excavated. The Laodicean church was one of the seven churches of Asia Minor addressed a decade or three later in the book of Revelation. Philadelphia up the road is there to, but Colossae, just down the road, is not. It has disappeared.

I think there’s every reason to think that these words are Paul’s words – or rather Paul and Timothy’s words. They are from the early 50s AD, written when Paul was in prison in Ephesus. They are a remarkable testimony to the growing faith and understanding of the church in its third decade.

Oh, and the reason why I think Paul had something to do with 1 Cor 13 – well, it’s in this opening prayer of thanksgiving....

But on to my second problem with receiving this as Holy Scripture – its ethical teachings.

3.18: ‘wives, be subject to your husbands’

3.22: ‘slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything’

Does not this validate slavery (there were many Christians in the 18th/19th centuries who thought it did and opposed the abolition of the slave trade on that basis). And does this not validate the subordination of women to men in marriage?

We should take encouragement from the fact that the leading abolitionists were Christians. William Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian with a very high view of the authority of Scripture. Some evangelical Christians today, whilst they wouldn’t condone slavery, do feel constrained by Paul’s teaching here to affirm the headship of the husband in marriage and, by extension, the inappropriateness of women having leading positions in the church – hence their opposition to women being bishops in the Church of England.

I have come to the view that this is the wrong way to read ethical injunctions in the bible. What may have been appropriate teaching in Paul’s own time and culture does not necessarily translate to ours. And therefore we should never quote the bible as proof texts or universal rules but we must read it and receive it as authoritative Scripture in a different way. In doing so, incidentally, I am in the company of none other than the reformed theologian John Calvin, who believed it was right to

overturn biblical injunctions against usury – moneylending at interest – because of wider principles drawn from Scripture that suggested that it was no longer appropriate to forbid it.

‘I conclude that we ought not to judge usury according to a few passages of Scripture, but in accordance with the principle of equity.’

But we don’t need Calvin to tell us that. Paul himself – or was it Timothy – in today’s reading gives us a better way of discerning what is the will of God. Vv9-10. To know the will of God we must grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding. The two streams of ethics today that are closest to this are wisdom ethics and virtue ethics. Wisdom ethics says that what you need to do is to build yourself up in wisdom – wisdom is what emerges in us as our knowledge and experience of the world expands. It is more than knowledge and more than experience, but can only come to be through knowledge and experience that is reflected upon and received deep within. Wisdom is more than the sum of the parts of our knowledge; it is what emerges out of it but is more than it.

Virtue ethics comes from Thomas Aquinas who integrated the classical cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude with the theological virtues – supplied by Paul, or was it Sosthenes and Timothy? - of faith, hope and love. Practise those, be rooted in those, grow in those and you will grow in your knowledge of what is right. That is not a head knowledge, so much as a gut knowledge. If you are rooted and grounded in love you will know what is right.

Vv9-10

That means that to follow Paul’s ethical way does not always mean slavishly obeying his ethical instructions. It doesn’t mean that we are free to ignore them but sometimes it means we must be mature enough to say that things have changed we must move beyond Paul. But to do so is to be truly Pauline- I believe it’s what he is urging us to do. That’s why reading Paul excites me more than ever because I still believe that to hear him truly is to hear the word of God.