

We have to put scripture readings into their context if we want to understand them. We can't take them out of the circumstances in which they were written and apply them as they are to our lives today. The scriptures are holy texts whose integrity needs protecting against this kind of misguided approach. This is why evangelical fundamentalism is often so literal in its understanding of the Bible generally, but it is especially true of the letters of St Paul. After all, elsewhere in this same letter to the Ephesians, he says:

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear; serve them with sincerity, as you would serve Christ.” (6:5)

To us and to our contemporary sensibilities, this sounds completely unacceptable, because slavery – at least in most places of the world, thank God – has been done away with. Modern slave traders and those who deal in human cargo are the worst kind of criminals. We might even imagine that St Paul was somehow supporting the system of slavery if we did not know, as we do, that it was established and accepted everywhere throughout the Roman Empire and beyond its borders; practically every ancient civilisation had slavery at the heart of its social and economic life. What he was saying is: If you *are* a slave, this is how Christ would want you to live; and St Paul, together with most of the early Church, was expecting Christ to return in glory very soon – imminently, in fact – so nobody was going to be a slave for much longer, anyway. We also have to remember that St Paul's letters were written to the young Christian communities that he himself had founded, in answer to specific questions that they had asked him. So, it may well have been the case that the slaves in the community at Ephesus were saying to themselves and everybody else: ‘If I am free in Christ, why should I be in bondage to my master? If the Lord is returning very soon, why should I remain a slave?’ St Paul, I guess, was trying to answer that question.

Which brings us to today's reading.

It's the case, I think, throughout the scriptures, that people are told what they need to hear. Look at the Ten Commandments, for instance: God told the people through Moses that they mustn't have other gods than himself or mustn't make idols; that they mustn't take God's name in vain; or commit murder, or adultery; that they mustn't bear false witness or covert other people's possessions. Now, since God told the people not to do all these things, we have to presume that this is exactly what they *were* doing. Would you need to tell your child not to walk on the carpet with muddy shoes if he wasn't actually in the habit of doing it? And the two positive commandments – honour your father and mother and keep the Sabbath holy – were presumably what they were *not* doing.

St Paul says in today's reading: "Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is the head of the Church and saves the whole body, so it a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives submit to their husbands, in everything."

Now, if we do not understand the context of this passage, it is simply embarrassing to us. Paul doesn't really help his point along when he makes an analogy between the immaculate Church and being free of spots and wrinkles. Yet, we must remind ourselves again that the letter to the Ephesians – like all Paul's letters – was written in answer to specific questions, the background to which was the imminent return of Christ in glory. Not only would slaves be tempted to rebel, but husbands and wives saddled with unloving or unappreciative spouses might well see it as an opportunity to break free of each other. St Paul is saying: No. Stay faithful and loving until the Lord comes – just as Christ is faithful to, and loves, his Church.

Paul visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey and, according to the Acts of the Apostles, during his third missionary

journey, he stayed there for three years. According to the Acts, a lot of people there were practising witchcraft and magic, but they repented and burned all their books after hearing Paul preach. There was also a temple to the goddess Diana and her cult was strong. Interestingly, the community at Ephesus crops up in the Book of Revelation – which was probably not written by the author of the fourth gospel – and in Chapter 2, verses 1-4, the angel or messenger to the Ephesian Church:

“These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”

This ‘first love’ was the Good News of Jesus Christ that was preached to them: they had obviously lost their first enthusiasm and had grown cold in their Christian lives; it is even possible that some of them returned to witchcraft or the worship of Diana. St Pauls’ letter to the Ephesians was written about AD62, and the Book of Revelation some forty years afterwards. All this is contextualising. It is setting the letter to the Ephesians within the historical circumstances of the time it was written. Obviously, what St Paul says, like the message of all his letters, carries a meaning beyond the merely historical – they are richer and deeper than that. For us, today – as it was for the slaves and husbands and wives he was writing to – his message is clear: try always to live lives that are rooted in and sustained by the love of Christ. Whatever your personal circumstances.