

Understanding the scriptures *in context* – that is, in the context of their time – is the key to a decent understanding of their message. Jesus used several different forms for his teaching. One of them was mystical and does not need to be put in any context at all to be understood: the Beatitudes, for example, and the ‘I am’ statements – ‘I am the Light of the world, I am the Way, the Truth and the life’ or ‘Come to me all you who labour and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’ This is mystical teaching and our heart understands it – we *feel* it – without any need to put it in context.

On the other hand, apart from several deeply mystical passages about love, St Paul’s writings do need to be put in context. In today’s second reading, St Paul says: “Those who have wives should live as though they had none...” and so on. This first letter to the Corinthians was written about 53 AD – barely 20 years after Jesus was crucified. The context is this: St Paul was expecting the Lord to return at any moment, which is why he wrote what he did. And yet, in his letter to the Ephesians – written 10 years later – he says: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her...”, which is quite a different thing. So by that time, 10 years later, he was no longer expecting Christ’s immediate return. In the same letter, he also says: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and sincerity of heart, just as you would show to Christ.” At the time the letter was written, slavery was a social institution and

not considered to be wicked or cruel or unjust – but that statement has to be seen in context to be properly understood, otherwise we might think that St Paul was encouraging slavery. I'd like to write a book about St Paul – but I'm too lazy to get round to it and there's already too much competition – because he was a wonderful, conflicted, neurotic, ever-faithful, stubborn-headed man in the very early Church. Sometimes he got things amazingly right and sometimes he got things amazingly wrong. None of this matters if we read St Paul's letters in context.

When Jesus said: 'Come to me, all you who struggle and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' – that doesn't need a context: it is mystical and universal. When St Paul says: 'Slaves, obey your masters' - that does need a context because it is practical and particular.

Context always opens our minds to the deeper and wiser meaning of the scriptures.