

Context is everything when it comes to understanding what a particular passage from scripture means. If we take something literally, as it stands, without any reference to the context in which was said or written – like time, place, readership, purpose and so on – we are likely to get into deep waters. This is true of both the Old and New Testaments and, because our second reading is from St Paul, it applies to his letters too, written to fledgling Christian communities that he himself had founded. Moreover: most of what Paul said was in response to specific questions that these communities had asked him.

The context of today's reading, from his first letter to the Corinthians, is that the second coming of the Lord Jesus was expected at any moment. Last week I suggested that if St Paul understood this literally, he apparently got his timing wrong; on the other hand, perhaps he meant it symbolically – or even both, because they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. When a man puts a ring on his wife's finger – and she on his – in the rite of marriage, that's a literal, concrete act... but it also has a deeply profound symbolic meaning – the literal doesn't exclude the symbolic or vice-versa. Perhaps this is how it is with what St Paul is saying in today's reading.

However, he does give the Corinthians very specific instructions and in last Sunday's second reading, he said that 'the world as we know it is passing away'. So the context for this letter is an expectation of the imminent Second Coming; and it is also certain that he is writing this because someone in the Christian community at Corinth had asked him whether, given that Christ was due to return at any moment, it was worth getting married. Today's reading is his reply.

But that context is no longer relevant for us today. Yet, still, it carries meaning for us. The first point to be made is that life in this world, whether we expect the Lord to return imminently or not, is

always changing and passing. If St Paul had been alive today, e-mailing a Christian community that he had founded, he would call the world a ‘virtual reality’. This virtual reality can be full of joy: of family, children, friends, love; it can also be full of misery: of psychological and physical suffering. In the rapture of love we would not wish to think of the world as a virtual reality; in the pain of toothache we might pray that it is.

The Koran, which sometimes quotes Jesus, says this:

“The Master Jesus, blessings and peace be upon him, said that this world is like a bridge: we may pass over it, but we must not build our house on it.”

And a quotation I have used before – chiefly because I like it – from the 13th century Persian poet and mystic Jalal Rumi, who said:

“I saw that we are God’s shadow and the world is our shadow.”

So, yes, this world *as we know it* is always passing away or – as one translation has it, ‘changing form’.

The second point to be made is that we should not fall into the trap of thinking that St Paul is saying that celibacy or virginity is superior to marriage. It isn’t. If celibacy was the superior way, St Paul’s parents would never have produced him. And yet the Church, historically, has always emphasised the superiority of the spirit over the flesh. It was there from the beginning, not long after Paul’s time, when the earliest desert fathers hid themselves away from the temptations of ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’ in remote, sun-baked places, only to come face-to-face with all three. Celibacy was lauded as infinitely preferable to the married state. Virginity, perhaps, earned the highest accolade – and if you happened to get yourself martyred as well, you were one of the brightest stars in the heavenly firmament. None of which reflects our own lived experience. I have been celibate all my life and have never for one moment regretted it, thank God – but I would never consider

celibacy superior to marriage and family. God forbid. They are different callings of equal grace. And if Ellen and Harry Clemens had remained celibate, I wouldn't be here either.

The third point to be made is that the cultural perception of marriage in St Paul's day was vastly different to our own. Two thousand years ago a woman was considered to be her husband's property, part of his goods and chattels; she could be divorced very swiftly and, being divorced, she would not be acceptable to anyone else; her evidence was not admissible in court because, as a woman, she would be considered unreliable. St Paul says:

"I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband."

Absolutely nowhere does he use the word *love*. Instead, we get 'anxious', 'please', 'divided'. And yet, in this very same letter, he gives one of the most noble, poetic and profound descriptions of love ever written. But that's the way marriage worked then, and we must be aware of this context if we are not to misjudge St Paul.

The creature is not in competition for the Creator's love. It may not have been understood in St Paul's time and society that one is revealed in the other, that – for example – the love between husband and wife manifests and reveals and is a reflection of divine love, not a hindrance to it. This, unfortunately, was not understood in the history of Christian spirituality either. Until quite recently, the manuals of prayer and spirituality urged us to 'put the love of no creature before the love of God.' But how could the love of a mother

for her child possibly detract from her love of God? There are not two loves but one, showing itself in two different ways.

How else can we love God? What is this 'love of God' that we should prefer to the love of anyone or anything else? Where is it to be found?

Not in a vacuum, certainly; love always seeks form, longs for flesh on its bones – the Nativity is the supreme template of that. The love of God is to be found in others, in allowing ourselves to be touched by their hearts and touching them in return. This is because they are not really 'others' at all. Beyond the 'virtual reality' we are indissolubly one, for love is one, as God is One. When the Lord looks at any of his children – from a blade of grass to a galaxy – he sees them all. This is the way we should look at them too, with his eyes and his heart. This is what 'love of God and love of neighbour' means.