



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024**

**Readings: *Psalm 62; I Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20***

***Epiphany III***

The seventh chapter of Paul's first Corinthian letter is rather unexpected. It seems to be about marriage, sex and virgins. And in one sense it probably is about those things, as Paul appears by the time we get to chapter seven to be responding to questions that the people of Corinth have asked about the sex life of devout Christians. This week's publicity about a book by Victor Manuel Fernández, an Argentinian Cardinal recently promoted by the Pope, <sup>1</sup> shows that sex is not something for which Christians are ineligible. As His Holiness says, 'Sexual pleasure is a gift from God', but must not be 'undermined by pornography'. <sup>2</sup>

That said, just like with most letters, with the seventh chapter of Paul's first Corinthian letter it's best not to take bits out of context. This letter is about rather more than marriage, sex, and virgins. So, if you were hoping for an exposition of these matters, dream on; I'm sorry.

Corinth was a prosperous port, a Roman colony run by people many of whom, only a few generations earlier, were still enslaved. Now freed, they had the understandable desire for upward mobility. But questing for prosperity and power can so often lead to twisted ethics and diluted virtue. Like many a port city, the sexual mores were also free. Little wonder, then, that new converts to the way of Jesus wanted to know how to conduct their intimate relationships.

The Corinthians know all too well that life as another nation's colony is not ideal. The risk of oppression, racism, and injustice is great. The enslaved might be free, but unelected governments too often make life hard for citizens, with expanding gaps between richer and poorer, and opportunities inequitably available. The Corinthians also know that life in an embryonic church is not always easy. As the community tries to define itself, its priorities and purpose, people jostle for position and power. Some are loud and out-there with their views, others are more discreet and need drawing out, then there's the specialists in holding grudges, ready for the coffee morning. There's confusion and controversy over doctrine and praxis. Feelings are hurt, divisions arise, cliques emerge, tensions tighten.

As we read this Corinthian correspondence, St Paul can leave us with a sense that life in both the Church and the world is fraught. And how familiar we are with that today. The world's volatility feeds a general sense of vulnerability that eats away at our equilibrium like a carcinogen. And like all cancers, sometimes we can keep that dis-ease at bay and at other times it takes over, especially when we watch the bombing of this community, or the abuse of that minority, or the changed attitude to virtue that can make life feel unfamiliar and in a sea, quagmire of vice.

Add to that how precarious the Church can feel in these islands, with lower profile and quieter voice, with open arguments and tarnished reputation, with fewer members and diluted confidence, and maybe we get Paul's point when he suggests something dramatic is imminent.

That phrase with which Pippa closed is haunting: 'the present form of this world is passing away.' (7.31) It is not entirely clear to what Paul was referring. Did he mean a looming political crisis in that day and age, some clash between the Romans and the Greeks, or does the world's 'passing away' refer to the *parousia* – that day of the Lord when the Bible says Christ will come again in righteousness and justice to judge the world, to bring all things to completion?

We do not know what Paul is getting at ... except that we recognise the tension that he describes. When we hear those words, 'the present form of this world is passing away', what is our reaction? Does that ring true for today? Faced with that thought do we say, 'well, maybe it is'? So do we experience shock? Anxiety? Resignation? Despair? I don't think any of those would be surprising. How can we look on at the fate of the Uyghurs, or the Gazans or the imprisoned Israelis, or the Yemenis, and not have some

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<sup>1</sup> Fernández, Victor Manuel 1998 *Mystical Passion: Spirituality and Sensuality* Mexico: [Ediciones Dabar](#)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, from a catechesis on 'the vice of lust' during General Audience in St Peter's Square 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024

visceral reaction in the solar plexus? Of course, we do. The death of that little Lincolnshire lad is no less sobering a sign of some people's lives, too.

But we cannot stay there, disconsolate and disabled. And Paul knows it as he writes to Corinth. So what he does in the first Corinthian epistle, is to address how Christians should behave in these circumstances, when world and church seem to be awry.

And it is interesting to note that he begins his letter to them, not by describing their problems and the world's dilemmas, though that would catch their attention. Nor does he castigate them for their faults and flaws and failures; nor does he go straight to the sex questions. He doesn't even help them understand much about what's going to happen when the world 'passes away'.

Rather, he starts the letter with a classic greeting, just as we started this service – the very same one: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>3</sup> Then he reminds them of the Gospel: that Jesus Christ is the power and wisdom of God, revealed through the cross – foolishness to some, a stumbling block to others, but actually the naked love of God in which we find God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and God's wisdom only folly to those who will not listen.<sup>4</sup>

And then, having re-articulated the Gospel, and used wonderful hymns to love<sup>5</sup> and powerful messages about the resurrection,<sup>6</sup> and pointed out his disappointment at their divisions, he only then says that all that stuff about the Gospel is the word of hope with which to face the future. It's as if he wanted them to sing the Scottish paraphrase Psalm 62:

*Only on God do thou, my soul, still patiently attend; my expectation and my hope on him alone depend.  
He only my salvation is, and my strong rock is he; he only is my sure defence: I shall not movèd be.  
In God my glory placèd is, and my salvation sure; in God I find my rock, my strength, my refuge most secure.*<sup>7</sup>

Paul is not denying the Corinthians' difficult reality, nor, I suggest, would he deny today's. How can we deny them? Instead, he seems to be saying 'don't focus on immediate problems, nor on daily life'. That's where the marriage, virgins, and sex come in. He mentions consumerism and bereavement, too. Don't shape your whole philosophy on the immediate: on when World War III is going to break out, on whether to get married or not, or on a quick fix of retail therapy. Rather, live knowing that the present form of the world is passing away. This isn't God's final word.

Now, in 2024, we may not express things as St Paul does for his clime and time, but the way I read what he is saying is that he wants us to live with trust in God's grace and anticipation of God's coming reign. That is what's to fashion what we think and what we do. Not panic. Not disillusion. Not despair.

Let me mention just three amongst the plethora of things which that might mean for us. First, to keep things in perspective. So, for example, we take truly seriously the food insecurity that defines 48 countries and the lives of over 250 million people. The data actually suggests, 'whilst the number of deaths caused by individual famines is often subject to a good deal of uncertainty, the overall [trend over time](#) is very clear: compared to earlier historical periods, far fewer people have died in famines in recent decades.'<sup>8</sup> Inspired that trying to eradicate famine can make a difference, we give liberally to work for all to have enough before any are complacent about having too much. The perspective not of panic but of compassion.

Secondly, and more personally, if 'the present form of the world is passing away' - I know not when or how - let's live each day as if it were our last, treating each other as if our latest meeting, conversation, or email were the last one we would ever share, ensuring that it expresses respect, with grace, and with

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<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 1.3

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 1.18ff

<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 13

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 15

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 62, 2-3 as in *The Scottish Psalter* 1929, and verse 1, the compilers of *Church Hymnary* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1973, as in CH4 42.1-3

<sup>8</sup> Hassell Joe and Max Roser, 2013, 2017 in *Famines*, from the website, *Our world in data*. Available at <https://ourworldindata.org/famines#:~:text=But%20whilst%20the%20number%20of,in%20famines%20in%20recent%20decades>.

generosity of spirit. Let's not spend the rest of our days regretting something we said or failed to say, just because we spoke thoughtlessly or reacted irately or pressed 'Send' too soon the night before, when the next morning would have been better so we could read it again.

And thirdly, as people of faith we hold on to hope, that trusts in the covenant God made and sealed in Christ: that God will be our God and – mystery beyond comprehension - we will be God's people. It is hope that refuses to capitulate to either the mores or the disasters of our day. It is hope that says, because God remains God, we will be what God calls us to be as embodiments of God's love wherever that love is hidden or denied. It is hope that lives today with a commitment to tomorrow.

And ironically, once we have those things in focus, we begin to be able to face the fact that today is tough and calls us to leave our nets or desks, or kitchens, to live God's future here and now<sup>9</sup> – in our workplaces, in our intimate relations, and in the Church.

As the Psalm concluded:

*Ye people, place your confidence in him continually: before him pour ye out your heart; God is our refuge high.*

It shall be so, Amen

N. P. Uden

21<sup>st</sup> January 2024

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<sup>9</sup> An allusion to Fred Kaan's hymn, *We pause to give thanks*, RS 569.3