

Body and soul: 1 Corinthians 6.12-20

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. 1 Cor 6.19-20

Which famous novel begins with these words?

“All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Everything was upset in the Oblonskys’ house. The wife had discovered an intrigue between her husband and their former French governess, and declared that she would not continue to live under the same roof with him.”

Actually affairs with governesses (French or otherwise) are pretty much standard fare in Victorian novels — as is the double-think that enables respectable husbands to rationalize their sexual intrigues as having nothing to do with the purity of their marriage.

“I know the world better than you do,” she said. “I know men like Stiva and how they see these things. You think he spoke to her about you. That never happens. These men may be unfaithful, but their homes, their wives, are their holy places. They manage in some way to hold these women in contempt and don’t let them interfere with the family. They seem to draw some kind of line between the family and those others. I do not understand it, but it is so.”

“Yes, but he kissed her ...”

“No, but wait a bit. ... You are still his divinity, and this infatuation never reached his soul ...”

Some of that double-think seems to be going on in the church in Corinth. Paul is challenging a whole range of unspoken assumptions here — some of which appear to be based on his own teaching.

So many conversations are going on in these verses that it's hard to keep track of who's saying what. "Do you not know?" comes six times in this one chapter (vv. 2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19). Paul sounds increasingly exasperated, like a coach who has to keep reminding the team about their basic training. So there's a lot here that he's already told them, either on his first visit or in an earlier letter. But there's also a hint of the other side of the picture, indicated by the quote marks in vv. 12-13 — what the Corinthians wanted to say to Paul. Hang on a minute, coach — I thought you said ...?

So hang on a minute, Paul — I thought you said Jesus died to set us free? Aren't Christians liberated from all that stuff about keeping the law? "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" — that's what you said to the Galatians (yes, Paul did say that: see Galatians 5.1). So we're living by the Spirit, we're not under the law — that means "All things are lawful for me", everything's permitted — right? (v.12).

Wrong! says Paul. "All things are lawful" — but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permitted" — but I will not let anything have power over me. Think about it this way: you're like the children of Israel in the story of the Exodus. You were slaves to sin, and now you've been set free — liberated by the sacrifice of God's Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ himself (5.7). But that doesn't mean you're free to do whatever you want. *You are not your own, you were bought with a price* (vv.19-20): you were liberated from slavery to sin to serve your new master. God led his people into the wilderness to become his own people, a foretaste of the kingdom of

heaven: *You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Exodus 19.6).

Yes, Paul ... we get that, but being holy is all about being spiritual, right? *"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both the one and the other.* What we do with our bodies doesn't really affect our souls — right? Behind this is a deep-rooted division between body and spirit which has deeply affected Christian thinking. The idea that the body is not important because it is part of the transient material world was popular in some forms of Greek philosophy.

The argument goes something like this. If God is Spirit, then holiness — being fit for God's purposes — is all about paying more attention to the spiritual and less to the material world. This can lead to downplaying the importance of creation, despising or mortifying the body. Or it can have the opposite effect: feeling that it's OK to fulfill the body's desires on the grounds that the body is mortal and is not connected with our spiritual lives. Either way, there's a radical disconnect between soul and body. It's another form of the double-think that allowed Stiva to have a stream of extra-marital affairs while still regarding his relationship with his wife as "holy". He just didn't connect the two.

Paul refuses to go down that route. Having sex with a prostitute, he says, brings two bodies into conjunction: they become "one flesh" (v.16). In other words, there is no such thing as casual sex: sexual relations with a prostitute entail exactly the same kind of commitment as the sexual relationship which forms the foundation of marriage (Genesis 2.24). The difference is that the one is a dangerous compromise with sin which allows impurity to invade the Christian body, while the other is a fulfilment of divine law which has the opposite effect -- as we shall see in ch.7. Body and soul

are not disconnected: what we do with our bodies (for good or ill) affects our souls — and vice versa.

There's an incredibly important insight here which we are constantly in danger of losing sight of. The call to holiness isn't just about going to church more, doing more spiritual things, tending our immortal souls — though we often talk as if it is. The call to *glorify God in your body* brings our faith down to earth. The body is God's first and greatest gift to us, the place where we learn (or fail to learn) what love is from the moment of birth. It's where we learn to understand who we are and how we relate to other people. (That's one of the reasons we find lock-down so hard — screens and masks get in the way of how we relate to people.) Through the body, we experience (sometimes painfully, sometimes joyfully) our place in the natural world — the material world that God created. Through the body, we experience our place in the social world — the public world of work and community and relationships — which God is enlisting us to create in partnership with him.

For you yourself created my inmost parts: you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are your works, my soul knows right well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and wove in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my form, as yet unfinished: already in your book were all my members written.

As day by day they were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139.12-16)

God bless,

Loveday

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