

What Bodies Are For
13th Sunday, Year C
Galatians 5: 13-18
27 June 2010

At clergy school one year the Wellington Diocese imported an American who specialised in dealing with churches in trouble. He began one of his talks with an unforgettable anecdote about why one particular church had required his services. Their Minister had divorced, and not long afterwards began dating one of the congregation members. But after a while he got cold feet, and ended the relationship. The next Sunday the woman concerned sat in the front pew, waited until the Minister entered the pulpit to begin his sermon, then walked forward and emptied a revolver into his chest. So with the Minister murdered in front of them, and the woman serving a life sentence, the traumatized congregation called in the specialist to get them sorted out.

When Paul starts going on about the struggle between flesh and spirit we generally reckon we are in for a terse talking to on the subject of sexual morality. But what he has to say to the Galatians this morning goes rather deeper than that. He is extremely angry with them on two counts. They have allowed Jewish leaning Christians to persuade them that they should keep the Mosaic Law, with the result that the blokes are about to have an encounter with the sharp end of a circumcision knife. And they are a Church at odds with one another, with lots of rows, fights and internal power struggles going on.

Paul's analysis of what has gone wrong constellates around a set of self-centred attitudes that go under the code name "flesh." When people are greedy for personal pleasure, when they put their comfort and ease first, when they think they are entitled to a good time and lots of fun, they have entered a mindset that is far from Christian. Pleasure, comfort, and fun – these are all good things to be enjoyed as a part of life – but when they become uppermost in people's priorities trouble follows. It comes from two directions.

People who are obsessed with life in the body are operating out of the instinctual and appetitive part of their nature where the passions rule. When the passions are in the drivers seat, good sense, moral reasoning, and an unselfish assessment of what the other people around us need, tends to go out the window. As self-control departs people often embark on a set of reckless actions that have happiness destroying consequences. Lust may in fact be bad for you.

And "flesh" centred thinking doesn't just bring havoc in people's personal lives – it also tends to undermine community. By definition this is a "me" centred set of attitudes that doesn't concern itself much with what the group needs. Since Christianity is an intensely

community orientated business these destructive attitudes strike at the very heart of what a local Church is about. Instead of modelling the kind of intimacy life that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have with one another, a Church starts dissolving into a bunch of greedy, needy, fight club associates. When that happens a Church is in mortal danger of losing God's providential interest. If provoked enough he will turn away from it in sadness, disappointment and anger. Or he may confront it with his terrible, purifying love, otherwise known as his wrath. If you don't believe me read the prophets.

So the problem that Paul is addressing this morning is not that the Galatians are bonking each other senseless, but rather that they are tearing each other to pieces as a congregation because of their carnal minded attitudes. Tomorrow night I fly to Auckland to take part in an Anglican national gathering on the subject of human sexuality. It is happening as part of an initiative by Archbishop David Moxon to deepen the unity of our Church in the face of the divisive tendencies that debates on this subject are causing. So Paul's flesh/spirit antithesis is of more than passing interest to me. In the limited time available to me this morning I intend to say just one thing on this subject.

My question is what are bodies for? In other words what was God up to when he created that intimacy seeking, enfleshed side of our nature that preoccupies us so much? Augustine of Hippo is a saint with a bad reputation amongst those who think that sexual abundance is a thoroughly good thing. But in fact he put love at the centre of his theology, and he was a very acute observer of the internal dynamics of erotic relationships. Henry Chadwick summed up Augustine's wisdom on this subject in a memorable sentence that could be read out with profit at every marriage Service. "He first saw the paradox that love, which is in quest for personal happiness, necessarily implies some self-renunciation and the pain of being made what one is not."

When we fall in love with someone, and it is the real thing, not just based on a needy, greedy delusion, then we come to see the gap between who we actually are and who we will need to become in order to love that person in the way they deserve. Such change often involves a costly transformation, the renouncing of things, habits, attitudes that have become dear to us. And there are times when we have to stand outside of ourselves, and objectively, dispassionately do unselfish things that are against our self interest because that is what is best for the beloved, and for the thriving of the relationship.

But that detached, dispassionate promoting of the other's best interests apart from our own isn't quite love in the erotic, romantic, married sense, because it ignores the appetitive nature of human love that passionately wants to be one with the beloved. That is important,

it is the name of the game in what goes on in such relationships, and God has put this kind of love in to the world because it draws us out of ourselves to take the risk of becoming involved in other people's lives. But of course if this appetitive aspect is all it is then it becomes just possession, or the using of people. Such appetitive relationships need the other balancing, unselfish honouring of the otherness of the one we are involved with in order to keep them healthy. So there is a paradox here. This kind of love has both a unitive and a distancing quality to it. We desire to unite ourselves to the beloved in a quite literal, physical sense, while we must at the same time wish and intend that our beloved will thrive away from our needs and our presence.

And there is another paradox in all this – one that I am going to leave you with. No human love, no intimate relationship, can be an end in itself – that would make an idolatry out of it. Every passionate attachment relationship must be ordered so as to give priority to God in the overall relational patterns of our personal life. That way our intimate relationships don't die as a result of suffocation and mutual obsession. And we stay focussed on the truth that God is closer to us than anyone else ever will be. And we honour the reality that at the End, in the future fulfilled world of the Kingdom, there will be no marriage, no exclusive relationships, and no more getting hot and bothered about one another. Whether our attitude will be, "Thank God that is over," or "I rather miss all of that," will be irrelevant. The very definition of what intimacy and closeness is will have radically changed.