

Third Sunday after Trinity 2019 Evensong
Numbers 9: 15 – 23; 1 Corinthians 7: 7 – 24

“I wish that all were as I myself am.” If it weren’t for the fact we’ve just heard it read as the opening verse of this evening’s New Testament lesson, I reckon most of us would find it hard to choose whether that was said by St Paul or Donald Trump! Just in case you’re in the mood for a Trump-ian bon mot, here’s something he did say: “I think I am actually humble. I think I’m much more humble than you would understand.” But it was St Paul who said “I wish that all were as I myself am.”

I know that apologists for St Paul would be at pains to point out that this is just a sort of throw-away introductory line and the real substance of what Paul is saying I in the next verse where he acknowledges the God-given dignity of everybody being different: “But each has a particular gift from God, one having one

kind and another a different kind.” So perhaps we ought to give Paul some credit for inclusivity.

But frankly it’s phrases like this in Pauline material that, rightly or wrongly, get under my skin. Certainly they don’t make me well disposed to accepting Paul’s prescriptions for married life. When you remember, though, that the passage we’ve read ends up with Paul encouraging his readers not to get hot under the collar about slavery, it makes you realise how contextualised our reading of the passage needs to be. The fact is there is nothing in this passage that can simply be transferred across cultures and millennia and directly applied and addressed to the complexities and vulnerabilities of married life in the twenty-first century. Anybody looking to this passage for a twenty-first century scheme of marriage guidance is on a hiding to nothing.

We must be careful, nevertheless, not to throw out the baby with the bath water. This passage may still be

worth reading. We need to ask ourselves why it was, in the first place, that Paul thought it necessary to impose this heavy shepherding. Why *did* Paul think it necessary to tell people not to walk out on inconvenient marriages or to baulk against being slaves?

If a school teacher suddenly shouts “Sit down!” what do you know is going on in their classroom? Somebody is standing up, aren’t they? You don’t need to tell people to sit down unless they’re standing up! And you don’t need to tell people to stay in their marriages unless they’re walking away from them; you don’t need to tell people to accept being slaves unless they’re rebelling against their slavery.

The community of people in Corinth to whom Paul was writing had become Christians. And it’s absolutely obvious that they’d found becoming a Christian so explosively liberating that they felt able to re-evaluate and re-orientate their fundamental life-

defining circumstances. When you become a Christian you start afresh with an absolutely blank sheet of paper. There are no rules, no assumptions, no expectations. You don’t have to do what convention dictates; you don’t have to do what fits in; you don’t have to do what’s respectable; you don’t need to worry about what other people think. You don’t have to be like everybody else. You’re allowed to change. You’re allowed to walk away. You’re allowed to become and grow into the person God has made you to be. There’s a new beginning: a blank sheet of paper.

The problem with the liberty of a blank piece of paper, of course, is that there comes with it the responsibility of deciding how to fill it in. Anything may be possible, but not everything is wise. Liberty does not give us a license to be selfish or reckless or scandalous. Which is why, of course, St Paul laid down for the Corinthians guidelines which made sense in their context, even if they make little sense to us. The absence of rules, of course, makes the responsibility of liberty all the more

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awesomely difficult to discharge. It requires prayer, thought, consultation, consideration for others, patience, graciousness and perhaps even obedience. But I am convinced that it is nothing short of explosive liberty with which we, as Christians, are called to wrestle.

Amen.