

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Amen.

Our Lectionary readings this week present us with some interesting possibilities. There is the story of the prophet Samuel as a very young boy learning to recognise the voice of God; there is the story of Nathanel, learning to recognise that the living Word of God can even come from Nazareth; and then there is this passage from Corinthians, which can leave you thinking: What??

The story of Samuel's calling is one of my favourites in the Hebrew Bible; and I always appreciate Nathanel's snarkiness about Nazareth. But the reading from Corinthians intrigues me; all three passages can be said to be about humans learning to recognise God; but Corinthians seems to show how messy human learning is.

Paul has been to Corinth previously and helped plant a church there. Corinth is a cosmopolitan city that draws heavily on Greek and Roman culture with a thriving theatre scene and active schools of philosophy.

Corinth is so placed on the Greek peninsula that it has access to two seaports, one facing Asia Minor in the east, and one facing Italy and the Mediterranean in the west. It has a large merchant and trading class, and one of the largest marketplaces in the Mediterranean Roman Empire. Paul himself is used to a cosmopolitan, urban life and seems to have been comfortable there. When he leaves Corinth, he entrusts the converts to his fellow missionaries and goes on to Ephesus. It is there that Paul hears distressing news: the converts in Corinth had gladly received his Gospel message, but they didn't entirely grasp the complete change of life that receiving the message entailed.

We considered last week how Jesus' baptism showed us the pattern for repentance, for change of life, for turning in new directions. The Corinthians, it seems, were confused, or maybe hesitant, or maybe even overwhelmed by the thought of the extent of life changes demanded by the Gospel. They were holding on to the pattern of life they had learned before hearing the Gospel. We can almost feel the alarm in Paul's writing as he comes to terms with the Corinthians' behaviour. But this is the messiness of human learning; and despite the alarmed tone of Paul's letter, we can see God's grace and patience with that learning.

The Corinthians had lived in this very Roman city, with its strong Greek culture; there were theatres, schools of philosophy, and people from many provinces, languages, and religions active there. The city was dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite, who was considered the protector of prostitutes; and you can imagine that with two seaports and a constant flow of merchants and traders with money to spend, that particular occupation was quite common. The Corinthians were used to this way of being in the world; and the Gospel was demanding something radically different. Paul learns that he needs to reach them with his message in a way that he probably wouldn't have to with an entirely Jewish audience. So Paul meets the Corinthians where they are; Paul remembers and quotes what are probably inscriptions he saw in the public places and philosophy schools in Corinth: "All things are lawful for me"; and "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food." Paul realises that these messages have been part of the Corinthians' lives longer than the message he left them with; and so he has to bridge the two, beginning with what they know and are familiar with, and returning to the demands of the Gospel.

“All things are lawful for me;” but the Corinthians, Paul says, must now think in terms of what is *beneficial* to them and to their community; what will build them up into a people in which the Holy Spirit can dwell richly.

Imagine the way of thinking the Corinthians would have been used to, living in a city in which prostitutes viewed their own bodies as things, objects to be used; imagine living in a city in which merchants bought and sold slaves alongside pottery and cloth, treating human beings as commodities; what a complete and radical change of thought for the Corinthians to be told that their bodies are a temple to God’s Holy Spirit, not things to be exploited; and that the temple to Aphrodite was unworthy of them. Paul has learned how differently he has to teach these converts, so unused to thinking of themselves as beloved children of God. And the Corinthians are learning that the new way of being demanded by the Gospel is in fact an expression of a God who values them in a way that defies the commodification of the marketplace.

God has claimed you as God’s own, body and soul, Paul tells them. God has chosen you as a dwelling-place on earth, a glorious new Temple that transcends the stone walls of the temple in Jerusalem. God did not create you to be used for anyone’s profit or meaningless pleasure; God created

you as God's beloved and intended you to turn in love towards others. The demands of the Gospel are more freeing than any law because the change the good news draws us toward is beneficial to all and harmful to none.

Do not value yourself by the price the marketplace puts on you, Paul says; value yourself by the price by which God bought you, body and soul. Your worth is greater than any law or philosophy or trade can bestow; you are the dwelling place of God's holy and life-giving Spirit.

Paul has embraced the new Israel that God is creating in calling all of God's people, Gentile and Jew, to become God's children; but Paul is also in the messiness of learning what bridges he has to build and what patience he has to show in bringing people in to this new world, this re-creation by God. The Corinthians had only known the world of buying and selling, even the buying and selling of human beings; the Corinthians knew of schools of philosophy that spent a lot of time on how to think and not a lot of time on how to love. The Good News that Paul brings bursts into their world and though it lights the fire of the Holy Spirit in them, it will take time for them to learn about the new direction in which they must turn, and the new ways in which the Gospel demands they live. They will learn

to love; to think of building up their community by behaving in ways that are beneficial to all; to continue to learn and listen for what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection requires of their lives. And they will learn that God is faithful, and God is patient; and every moment and every day God invites us all to learn and learn again the way in which we should go. Amen.