

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: 2 Corinthians 5.16 – 6.13: March 21: Some Notes

Here we are spoilt for choice of memorable phrases. “We don’t evaluate people by what they have.” “The old life is gone; a new life emerges.” “Become friends with God.” “Now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped.” “Living on handouts, yet enriching many.” “Live openly and expansively.”

The latest refugee crisis underlines the message about how we should value/evaluate people. Identity and value all too often depend on income, job, status, and other worldly measurable things. As a refugee, you can leave behind income, job and status. In an oppressive society where you have dared to challenge the system, the former university professor can be doing odd jobs to buy food. The person is as real and their inherent value as great as ever, but we see the odd job man and rate him accordingly. It is good to remember village carpenter = Lord of Creation. Or, if you prefer Gilbert and Sullivan, “The Lord High Bishop Orthodox, the Lord High Prisoner in the stocks!”

There are bits here which demand meditation rather than explanation – particularly the statements about the Atonement. Just what does the sinless Christ dying for sinful humanity mean? Imagine an international judge trying a large group of war criminals, and, in response to the overwhelming evidence of their guilt, going off and hanging himself. What does this do to and for the war criminals? On the face of it, it just adds to their guilt: another innocent has died because of them. Yes, Christ sets u an example to follow. But if all the would-be good people get themselves killed, doesn’t that simply leave the field free to the won’t-be good people? Speculation about how it works certainly gets us to the edge of wonder, maybe even the depths of wonder. It doesn’t explain. All we can say for certain is that the crucified and risen Christ has, in very many lives including the life of St Paul, changed everything for ever.

There is another challenge here. Everything changed for ever. Nothing will ever be the same again. But not all Christians have a dramatic conversion experience. They have a daily signing up and a gradual change experience. Even those who do have an identifiable conversion experience may hesitate, look back, doubt, even stumble; and need the “new every morning” experience to see them through their Christian lives. When Paul gets to his long list of trials and tribulations and Christian responses (and Christian paradoxes), he starts PATIENT (ULTIMATELY VICTORIOUS) ENDURANCE. Grief and celebration go together.

Many hymns/songs come to mind: “There’s a new world beginning...”, “Fight the good fight”, “You raise me up”, “Changed from glory into glory”. It can be confusing that Paul sticks opposites together with such joyous abandon; b but the happy clappy brigade have to get real. The ever cheerful Ukrainian woman in the cellar yielding to tears when her father rings to say there are 8 Russian soldiers in his house, stealing cigarettes as an indication of common ground with their Ukrainian brothers.

The theme of Reconciliation with God and with each other needs to be seen both in its historical context: God doesn't care whether you are Jewish or Greek or Roman. That was quite shocking to many of Paul's readers. And (forgive lapse of grammar and punctuation) in our current context: God doesn't care whether you are Russian or Ukrainian or British. (Pity the unhappy African student escaping from Kiev, and not fitting the Russian v Ukrainian division the soldiers want to squeeze him into.

Concluding thought: If you are a Christian who wants to stand still, and a member of a church that wants to stand still, maybe skip this passage?!