

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: June 13: 2 Corinthians 11: 1-15

Paul picks up the Jewish tradition of thinking about the people married to God, and turns this into the Church as the Bride of Christ. Note the collective emphasis, rather than an emphasis on the individual convert. In the Jewish family, the father arranged his daughter's marriage. That is captured in Paul's role. So too is the friend of the groom/friend of the bride role of making sure that the bride came to the marriage bed virtuous.

There are all sorts of quite complicated strands in this narrative – not least in the argument about Paul not getting paid. Paul seems to have worked on the basis of not taking money from a church while he was with that church – falling back on tent making or on financial help from another church. (The Church at Philippi seems to have given him most financial support, although not a rich Church.) Greek tutors got very well paid, obviously especially where they worked for a rich family. Fancy orators got paid for talking clever (which Paul refused to do, though he would probably have been quite good at this. The false prophets Paul condemns didn't hesitate to ask for money. The payment issue was multi-faceted: the pastor/preacher could be seen to be doing it for profit motives. It was tricky to criticise, however much they needed criticism, the people who were paying your salary. It was tempting to preach what the people who were paying wanted to hear.

C of E congregations don't in general directly pay their vicar, so we are not familiar with the financial nexus issues. However, historically, where a priest was more or less appointed by and more or less paid by a patron, for example the Lord of the Manor, you really didn't expect that priest to criticise the morals of the Lord of the Manor! Think of the issues where a vicar has been appointed with a brief to wake up a lazy self-satisfied parish, and the parish is asked to pay for being dragged kicking and screaming into mission, outreach, experimental worship, new jobs for new people!

The text touches on the gradations in traditional Jewish learning: the basic elementary stage, Mishnah where you got to learn texts, and Talmud where you began to seek for inner meanings.

WE really can't be sure what the false prophets were getting wrong. But one of the commentaries, written from the Evangelical standpoint, is convinced that what they were doing was soft pedalling Jesus as Saviour. In other words, they were sticking to the Jesus soft option: Jesus the Teacher giving us good advice on how to behave; Jesus the Prophet, promising good things for good people and bad things for bad people. This was a Jesus who fitted in with a long line of prophets; and also fitted in quite comfortably with a multi-faith/multi-God society in which truth was multi-faceted, and could be heard in all sorts of places. The commentator pats himself on the back for upsetting a multi-faith gathering by saying something on the lines of "If you don't encounter God in the crucified Christ, you don't encounter God!" The scary thing is that, on this basis, Paul might have had much the

same criticisms of a great deal of 21st Century Christian presentation of Christ as a nice chap who could slip quietly into the party, and not upset anyone.

A couple of other commentary reflections. One is that some Jews believed Cain was the son of Eve from a relationship with Satan. (More happened in the Garden than the Bible specifically says.) Personally, I think this is a male thing – throwing onto Eve the joint sin of Adam and Eve, who were together when Satan turned up. Paul has to refer to Eve in this section, because he has classed the Jewish People and the Church as female.

The other is a rather effective comment on what good preaching is. After a formal dinner, the guests were challenged to recite something from memory. An actor chose the 23rd Psalm, and gave it his best. A minister bravely chose the same text, and gave it his best. Initially, the others present thought the actor was far more dramatic; but they quickly decided that the minister was far more effective. The actor, to his credit, told the minister: “I know the psalm, but you know the shepherd!”