

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: June 20th: 1 Corinthians 11: 16-21a: Some Notes

As always with one of the shorter study passages, there is something to be said for looking at more than one Bible version. In terms of the Message Version, I was taken by the phrases “three-ring preachers”, “admirable tolerance for imposters who rob your freedom”, and “the egomaniacs of the pulpit”. One of the reasons Tom Wright gives for arguing that this part of the Second Letter is indeed part of the Second Letter, and not the missing “angry letter” is that Paul is “tongue in cheek” rather than teeth in throat.

Since Paul talks here (in this version) about preachers, it is worth asking again what we who listen rather than preach expect from a sermon.....and maybe ask ourselves what if any feedback we give to the preachers we listen to. What word would you attach to the “audience” reception: entertainment, education, inspiration, empowerment, challenge, threat, discomfort, change, upset, affirmation, confirmation, question-raising...? I like the Commentary note about a well-known preacher being congratulated on a sermon; and responding “I wonder what difference it made”. I’ve told before the story of a youth group member (probably now a grandparent) who listened to a talk on the dangers of smoking, unrolled and lit a cigarette, took a puff, and said (seriously) “It makes you think”.

Tom Wright’s piece about appropriate and inappropriate parties raises interesting questions in the context of the continuing Party Gate debate. He speaks of the serious minded boss of a firm in difficulties who forces himself to attend a party organised by two of his rather inept subordinate managers who are good at parties but not good at management. The relevance to this bit of Paul’s letter is Paul’s readiness to play the fool, or to seem foolish, when there is a serious point to it; but not to be a fool. Now I dislike parties. I’d rather attend a funeral...though not rather have someone dead! But I can see the need to force yourself to celebrate with people, for the sake of the group or the business... maybe just in time to help with the clearing up!

You may have come across the Holy Clowns. They visited St George’s some years ago: the idea being to get people to have a fresh perspective on their faith, and to be able to laugh at themselves. They were dedicated missionaries; though a little wasted on someone like me who doesn’t find clowning funny. (“Miserable s.....” I hear you cry.)

P.S. Do jokes help or hinder a sermon? (And yes of course it does depend on the joke and the sermon.) Oddly, I do remember some very effective funny reminiscences from funerals, where you might not expect jokes to go down well.

The reference to the false preachers taking away freedom is probably to do with those preachers wanting to hang on to every last detail of Jewish law. It doesn’t mean Christians are free to do what they like: they are free to do what Christ likes. I confess to a certain sympathy for Jews or others willing to go to the stake for strict observance of rules that just seem unimportant to everyone else. “Why die rather than eat pork?” “Because I believe

eating pork is wrong!” “Why not say the Emperor is divine, if that keeps the Emperor happy?” “Because only God is divine!” “If the other guys in the group do a bit of dirty sniggering, why not keep your place in the group by joining in? You don’t need to mean it.” OK, if no work on the Sabbath doesn’t stop you blowing your nose on the Sabbath, maybe it wouldn’t be very dreadful to wash a handkerchief on the Sabbath so that you have a clean one to blow your nose with. However, if you keep finding escape clauses, it isn’t long before the Sabbath looks exactly like every other day. What do you think about detailed rules?