

The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Jonah 3:1-5, 10 |
| <i>Response</i> | Make me to know thy ways, O Lord; |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Mark 1:14-20 |

The third Sunday for Ordinary Time continues our trip through Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth—1 Corinthians. And now we move into chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, which is a long and extremely rich chapter that deals with marriage and celibacy, consecrated virginity—I mean, there’s so much going on in this chapter. Unfortunately, we only get to look at a tiny sliver of it. It’s in chapter 7, verses 29-31.

But this section the Church gives us really is, in a sense, the heart of this chapter. It’s the undergirding worldview that makes sense of everything that Paul says in this chapter about the state of life—in the married state, as well as virginity, everything Paul says about divorce, remarriage—all those different teachings that are strung throughout this chapter. They’re really all rooted in these verses. So they’re very short, but they’re very packed with information. So let’s look at 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, and then I’ll try to unpack them and draw out some of the implications that they have for how we live in the world. And Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 7:29:

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those

who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.¹

Alright, so you can see here that in this section, Paul is talking about what theologians call eschatology. He's talking about his theology of the end of the present world and the beginning of a new world. And I've mentioned before in these videos how if you want to understand Paul, one of the most important underlying concepts that you need to grasp is the Jewish idea—very common in the literature of the first century and thereafter too—of two worlds or two ages.

My students will know I call it “the two circles,” because I'll draw two overlapping circles on the board, one referring to “this world” or the old creation and the other referring to “the world to come” or the new creation. And then the overlapping portion in the middle of those two circles is where Paul would use the terminology of being “in Christ” so that Christians, although in their bodies they still live in this fallen world, through Baptism they've actually died to this world and become members of the new world—the world to come, the new creation.

And the result of that is that they live in a kind of liminal realm—an in between realm—between this world and the world to come...between the old creation and the new creation. So Paul here is trying to instruct the Corinthians about how to live in relationship to this world, which is going to pass away very soon, as he says there:

...the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods...

So notice the categories that he's giving there in telling Christians how to live in the world. That's a very, very important list of examples. He speaks from the perspective of the husband, so he says:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

...let those who have wives live as though they had none...

So spouses. He talks about mourning for loved ones—live as though you're not mourning. So then he talks about rejoicing, so celebration, as if you're not rejoicing. And then possessions...those who have goods as if they have none. And all of those he sums up with the expression:

... those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

So this is basically the Pauline equivalent of what John teaches in the Johannine, letters that Christians are called to live *in* the world but to not be *of* the world. James talks about this too. It's in the Catholic epistle. So for a lot of people, they puzzle, like, what does that mean to be in the world but not of the world?

Well, Paul here gives us the answer. Basically, it's in the last line:

...the form of this world is passing away.

So what Paul is saying is, he's trying to teach the Corinthians that although they still live in the old creation, as Christians, they need to recognize the truth of the fact that this fallen world is dying. It's in the death throes. It's passing away. It's not eternal, like some of the pagans thought. It's not going to last forever, like some of the pagans thought. It is going to end. And therefore, we have to live—in our dealings with the world—with that truth in mind, whether it's the question of our relationship to our spouses or the relationship to our loved ones who we've lost (for whom we're mourning)...or our relationship to our possessions or our activities in this world. All those things have to be done through the lens of the fact that the form of this world is passing away.

So I always joke with my students here, when Paul says:

...those who have wives live as though they had none...

That doesn't mean treat your wife poorly or forget to call her if you're on a business trip or something like that. "I'm sorry, honey. I was living as if I had no wife." That's not what Paul means here. What he's effectively teaching here in 1 Corinthians 7 is detachment—living a spirit of detachment now—from the world that we know is eventually going to pass away.

Now, a lot of students when they read these verses—and I've had this experience myself as you first encounter Paul—kind of find it a little harsh. Like, if I'm married, why should I live as though I have no wife? Or if I'm engaged in business, why should I live as though I have no possessions? Or if I live in the world, why should I pretend that I have no dealings with it? What is Paul really getting at here? What's the problem with rejoicing?

And the answer to that question is Paul's not being harsh; he's actually being realistic. Because the fact is, no matter how good any created thing is in this world (in the old creation), it's going to come to an end. So being overly attached to anything is unreasonable, if you step back from it and look at it from the perspective of the old and the new creation...from a Christian worldview. And the fact of the matter is that many Christians live in this world as if they are of the world and as if the world is going to keep going and going, forever and ever, and that the temporary and finite and passing goods that we have are in fact forever.

And they're not...even the good of marriage, as Paul already has talked about in 1 Corinthians 7. When a husband dies, the wife is free from the marriage covenant. It ends with death. And every single married person is going to either bury their spouse or be buried by their spouse. That's part of what you sign up for in marriage. So it's reasonable to keep in mind and to live with a certain detachment from that reality—to not be overly attached to one's spouse or one's loved ones. They're going to die as well.

It's one of the realities parents have to think of. When I bring a child into the world, it's beautiful. I give it life. But I also give it the gift of death. Eventually, my children—whether I see it or not—they're all going to pass away. That's a sobering reality, but it's the truth.

So Paul here is trying to get the Corinthians to think this way about the way they live in the world. And effectively here, what he's doing is teaching the Christians in Corinth to live in a spirit of detachment. Or you could put it positively...he's teaching them not to be excessively attached to the passing things of this world. And that's really going to be the context for everything Paul says about marriage, about celibacy, about consecrated virginity. Everything he says in this passage about the human body, human sexuality, is going to be seen through that lens of the fact that we aren't actually made ultimately for this world, but for the world to come.

So this is a short video, because it's a very short passage. But in closing, I want to highlight two things from the living tradition, just to flesh this out a little. The first is from St. Thomas Aquinas. As I've mentioned elsewhere, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote commentaries on all of Paul's letters in the thirteenth century. These were lectures at the University of Paris, when he taught there as a Dominican friar...and a great scholar. In his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, in his lecture on 1 Corinthians—I still haven't found any silly jokes like I make in my lectures, but in his lecture on 1 Corinthians he says this:

To sum it up universally, “they that use this world,” i.e., worldly things... “Let them be as if they used it not,” that is, let them not cling to worldly things with excessive delight. “Having food and clothing, with these let us be content” (1 Tim 6:7).²

That's Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, paragraph 382. So notice two aspects of Thomas' teaching. First, what Paul is showing us there is that we should not be attached to worldly things with *excessive* delight. Very important. So we can take delight in the things of this world. We can take delight in the beauty of the created world. God has made it beautiful. He has made food and fun and family and friends, things to be enjoyed...things to be cherished, things to be celebrated.

At the same time, the delight that we take in them should not be excessive. And excessive delight happens precisely when we start treating the passing things of

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* no. 382

this world as if they have eternal value, and as if they are eternal when in fact, they're finite. They're temporary, and they all will only find their ultimate end in God.

And the other aspect of this is contentment with the necessities of life. We're not angels—we need food. We need drink. We need clothing. But as Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:

There is great gain in godliness with contentment... (1 Timothy 6:6)

So one of the things that happens with the capital sin of avarice is that a person starts to chase after the things of this world (the possessions of this world) as if they are eternal, as if they will bring everlasting happiness...as if they can't be lost by sickness or death or an accident or a disease.

So it's an irrational approach to created reality that doesn't foster contentment but actually fosters more avarice and more discontentment. Because a person is never happy until they have what they want, and the problem is that disordered or desire for possession is infinite, because it's actually ordered teleologically to God. And so no finite thing is ever actually going to fill the void—or the desire or the need—that the human heart has. So the irony is that the more people possess—the more food, clothing, drink, money, possessions they have—the more discontent they become. So Paul—and St. Thomas through Paul—is teaching here to avoid excessive delight and also to be content with the necessities of life that God provides.

And my favorite expression of this comes from a great saint—truly great saint—and that is St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. And I probably quoted this before, but since I've been doing these videos for years now, and I can't remember everything I've said or what I've not said, I'm going to quote it again in his *Spiritual Exercises*, because you can't hear this too much. It's the principal and the foundation of the spiritual exercises. Anyone out there...any Jesuits out there will know exactly what I'm talking about.

But I would say that the principal and foundation of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius is, in effect, a classic expression in the living tradition of what Paul is teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:29. It's a healthy detachment from created, finite goods. And this is what St. Ignatius says:

Man is created to praise, to reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining to the end for which he was created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him. Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.³

That's paragraph number 23 of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

So in other words, because we are created to praise, reverence and serve God—and by this means to save our soul—everything that we do in this world, all of our relationship to worldly possessions, worldly goods, has to be through the lens of salvation. And everything that helps us to that end, we should use to it. And anything that takes away from that or hinders the salvation of our soul, we need to rid ourselves of it. And that's effectively what Paul is getting at here—teaching the Corinthians to live under the reality of the fact that this world (the form of this world, the old creation) is indeed passing away.

³ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* no. 23, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J.