

Time grows short

The world is being radically changed; this excuses Paul's urgency. So the letters to the Christians in Corinth are full of warning signs and what Paul clearly considers essential advice. Questions from Corinth on matters of morality give Paul a chance to talk about marriage, self-control and what it means to be a faithful person in a time when there seems to be a sexual revolution underway: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." This is only one of the matters that the folks in Corinth have been concerned about (7:1) But Paul says (v.2) it's better to be married than to descend into 'sexual immorality. Paul's heart is clearly not in it though. "This I say by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am [single] But...each has a particular gift from God...' (6-7)

Yes, the world is being radically changed, and Paul wants his friends to be ready. Not only because of changes in society - though that would be challenge enough; Paul has discovered, since his encounter with the risen Jesus, that there are fundamental changes promised. And the appointed time has grown short.

These warnings don't always catch our 21st century imaginations. End time predictions are the tabloid trash of modern Christianity. *Too many 'preachers' have exploited human anxiety by twisting texts to describe current situation for me to have any confidence in their apocalyptic certainties.* And Paul offers fuel to the fire-and-brimstone crowd with his references to time growing short and the passing form of the world. Stay single or married - don't get too deeply invested in the stuff of the world, says Paul - and the 'end-of-time' crowd all slide to the edge of their seats...sorry, I'm not buying it.

Time grows short

I am convinced that Paul was reading the signs of change correctly, not because the apocalypse was immanent, but because his world has only recently been completely undone.

Paul is on a journey from studious, faithful, zealous believer in the ancient traditions of Judaism to follower of Jesus and proclaimer of the Gospel. He is not ashamed of the foundations of his faith (...I am a Hebrew born of Hebrews...Philippians 3:4-7) and so long as that early form of Paul's faith remains unshaken, all is right in his world. Within the precepts and promises of his well researched faith Paul found a way to navigate the chaos that was the ancient near East. So sure is Paul that his faith is essential to his (and societies') survival that he pursues and persecutes those who seem to pervert his notions of 'pure' Judaism. Paul was a true believer.

And into the midst of Paul's certainty a challenger arrives. Jews who proclaim Messiah has come -those who follow a leader who was raised from the grave. To Paul this new revelation offered nothing but confusion. Life was hard and death was final. The suggestion of anything else is disruptive, pie-in-the-sky nonsense...until Paul's own certainties were challenged by an encounter with Jesus.

Suddenly, a world that made perfect sense to Paul through the lens of his faith had to be imagined differently. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign that a world once defined by lives that lead to death is once again a world described in God's terms. Human life had been defined by earthly structures and human powers, but suddenly the human powers are rendered powerless. The grave cannot hold the One whom the worldly, human powers thought they had defeated.

Time grows short

Jesus talk of the weak made strong and the meek inheriting the earth take on real meaning once we are confronted by the risen Jesus. The world as it once was - limited and limiting; described only by human imagination - is once again the property and product of God's Holy imagination. And Paul's eyes are gradually opened to a different - but no less faithful - way of understanding God's desire for Creation.

It is tempting to fall into the trap set by the 'end-times' crowd. Now (as in Paul's time) the slow but steady increase in divisive politics and competitive religious fervour has produced disastrous human consequences. Humanity seems bent on falling further from the Divine ideal every single day. But what if Paul is not calling for people to wait patiently for the apocalypse? What if that radical upheaval has already happened?

Paul's encounter with Jesus - his 'conversion' from one kind of faithfulness to a new understanding of faithfulness - has set the world on fresh foundations. In Jesus, Paul finds a new way to understand the world. Evil acts are not eliminated, they are revealed as fruitless failures of human endeavour. Rather than a climactic battle between good and evil, Paul is able to see - in everything - the small, subversive spark of hope. "For the present form of this world is passing away." The assumptions he formerly held are being eroded, and the goodness of God is prevailing, little by little.

It seems to me that this is how God works. Notwithstanding our favourite stories of massive displays of Divine intervention - floods and plagues and all that CB DeMille level stuff - even within the stories of such massive scale, the revelation happens slowly and piecemeal.

Time grows short

Even on the day of resurrection, that great act of Divine love and justice is understood only gradually, and it is only fully acknowledged as an act of God after the fact.

Time is growing short. The form of this world is STILL passing away. And in every terrible, challenging moment there is the opportunity to see both the worst and the best. And because we are people of the resurrection, we have been given the chance to set our perception of the world to rights. We can, in faith, find the spark of hope in the darkest moments of human history. We find the strength and courage to persevere - to move forward - not longing for an end, but sure of a new thing.

That is the treasure of the gospel - not that God would allow evil to bring things to an end, but that God, in spite of evil, continues to redeem and re-create in front of our eyes.

Let it even now be so.

Amen.