

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

28.01.2024

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'I would like to see you free from all worry. An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife: he is torn two ways. In the same way an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has to worry about the world's affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband.'

That was St. Paul's advice to the faithful men and women who made up the Christian community in Corinth. Now, if I stood here and gave you that same advice you would think I was nuts. Some of you may think that anyway.

But here's the thing. St. Paul, unlike some politicians who hypocritically claim you can't change your policy or election promises (although they all do it) has the wisdom and common sense to know that as circumstances change, as our understanding changes, as tomorrow and a new day brings different conditions or crises that must be addressed, as we are met with new challenges, then we must have the courage to change and adapt.

St. Paul's initial teaching on marriage, living as though you were not married, not taking a partner because it will distract you from more important issues, has a context – as do all policies, rules, laws and teachings – and context, like it or not, is a very moveable feast.

St. Paul was convinced the world was about to end. Christ was about to return in glory. In a matter of days, weeks, or months it would all be over. The apocalypse was at hand, going on with worldly affairs like marriage, work, raising children, had no point to it. Everything was about to come crashing down and the faithful were about to be assumed triumphantly into heaven.

Later, in his writings to the Corinthian community, Paul must own the fact he got it wrong. Circumstances had changed. Christ was in no hurry to return. The world was not about to end. The Christian community was living in a different context. Paul's policy on marriage and partnerships had to change because the early Christian community found itself in very unexpected and different circumstances.

Paul's change of policy on marriage must have surprised many in the Christian community. No doubt he was roundly criticised by many for changing his emphatic policy. I can just imagine fingers wagging after one of his homilies as he backtracks on his earlier policy statements on marriage. What began as a policy against marriage becomes a policy praising love with such poetic eloquence that St. Paul's later writings

on love are by far the most common readings chosen by brides and grooms for their wedding.

Like stage three tax cuts circumstances change – and St. Paul was big enough and wise enough to discern when change to teaching and policy was needed. Not something the Church has always been good at.

Thankfully, by the grace of God, Pope Francis has shown that same ability and courage to discern that in changed circumstances, and the very different context in which we live today, policies and teachings must adapt and grow. Not in contradiction of the past but as an evolution of our understanding of the ways of God and our discerning of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to the difference between St. Paul's early advice to shun marriage and family life as the way to holiness with the words of Pope Francis in his 2016 exhortation *On Love in the Family*:

'A positive experience of family communion is a true path to daily sanctification and mystical growth, a means for deeper union with God. The fraternal and communal demands of family life are an incentive to growth in openness of heart and thus to an ever-fuller encounter with the Lord. . . Hence, those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that family life detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit. . .' (#316)

Like St. Paul, and like Pope Francis, may we all have the courage to change as we grow in our understanding of the ways of God, and evolve and mature into the people God calls us to be.