

## The Twelfth Sunday of the Year

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

How can you be wrong when you are so sincere? How can anyone who is so sure of being right enter into any kind of conversation or dialogue? Can a monomaniac be trusted to have a balanced view of anything? Paul had to contend with these questions in his own mind as well as in the attitude of others towards him.



Paul's first letter to the Corinthians corrected misunderstandings and abuses of the Gospel. It restored the equilibrium of the community and set its mind at rest. The Corinthians were able to get on joyfully with their Christian lives. Then along came a second wave of missionaries. These were Jewish Christians who had not accepted Paul as a bona fide Christian, and with Paul's background of persecuting the Church, who could blame them?

The topics Paul deals with in this letter give us a clue to their criticisms. They must have said that Paul was not a real apostle because he had never seen Jesus in the flesh; that he boasted arrogantly and that he was prone to change his mind without warning; that he exploited his converts by taking money from them; that he was brave enough in his letters but afraid to meet his enemies face to face.

Today's reading is part of a section of the letter dealing with the authenticity of Paul's apostolic ministry. It is typical of Paul that while answering a criticism he opens up a much wider vision of what Jesus actually achieved through his life, death and resurrection.

Paul talks about being overwhelmed by Christ's love. Paul's word for 'overwhelmed' is at the centre of a very wide web of meaning in the Greek of his time. It suggests being enclosed and completely surrounded in a way that holds everything together in its proper place. The word was used metaphorically for the way rowers all pull their oars in unison. There is also a strong suggestion that the person who is overwhelmed is also constrained and even distressed by the power of the feeling.

The same word is used in the potent threat against unfaithfulness in Deuteronomy where it says that heaven will be "closed up" against idol worshippers (Dt.11:17). Paul's use of the word implies that he has no choice anymore but to act and think as he does when he thinks of how Christ died to save people from sin and death.

The consequence of being closed up in the love of Christ is that he finds himself living a new kind of existence. The world in the presence of the love of Christ is new. It is not the same as the world outside that love. Christians are therefore part of a new creation. In other words, it is not enough for the new missionaries to have seen Jesus in the flesh: they must also live this new life in the light of the resurrection. The resurrection changed everything so Paul can say, "Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now."

The readings from the Book of Job and the Gospel today are the bookends around Paul's great insight. In Job, the writer repeats the vision of Genesis where God puts everything, even the tumultuous sea, within its proper bounds. In the Gospel, Jesus calms the storm and symbolically recreates the order of things before sin entered the world. Jesus inaugurates a new act of creation, which transforms everything.

Paul, who is part of this new creation, has left the world of sin, petty jealousies, rivalries, argument, hatred and duplicity behind. He does not judge by the standards of the flesh. He lives by the rules of the new creation, which enable him to be jealous without hatred, to boast without pride, to love without being selfish. These are the qualities that make him a saint and enabled him to say, "Imitate me." (1 Cor.4:16)