

Ministering on Manchester Street

a sermon preached on the
2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 18 January 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore
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Lecton: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

This season has been focussing our attention on that astonishing proclamation that the Divine is all mixed up with the human, and vice versa. The Sundays of Epiphany shift our attention from the birth of Jesus to moments in the life of Jesus in which his identity is shown, or made manifest – the Greek word literally means ‘to show’, ‘to light up’, to become visible’, ‘to appear’. The purpose of these showings, of course, is not to leave us with interesting history, but to help us see the intimacy of the relationship between the Father and the Son which we share, by virtue of being those sanctified, who are all of one with the One who sanctifies.¹ “Do you not know,” Saint Paul rhetorically asks those troublesome members of the church at Corinth, “that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”²

With that high calling in mind, today I want to reflect upon something very practical, pastorally-sensitive, local and immediate. I was asked by someone some time ago whether I felt that it was possible for us to foster a relationship with local sex workers and the Prostitute’s Collective, without giving the impression of condoning prostitution. It’s a good question. It’s certainly true that I frequently see and hear things which make me weep. And I know that many of us deeply lament the state of life which some of the street women seem to survive, the degradation, the abuse and misuse, the violence and the tragic loss of human dignity. And with Mellory Manning’s memorial service still very fresh in our memory it’s a bit of a jolt to find the lectionary giving us this Pauline text today – “The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord.”³ “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be so!”⁴

So this is no mere philosophical or academic speculation, but a very real pastoral and evangelical matter for us here at these crossroads.

The English words ‘prostitute’ and ‘fornication’ are from the same Greek word *πορνεία porneia*, from which, of course, we get pornography. There has been a tidal wave of words on this subject down the Christian centuries, a deluge which shows little sign of abating. As recently as the eve of Christmas the Pope managed to deliver a Christmas message with pastorally-disastrous consequences. Admittedly he was mis-quoted, allegedly claiming that homosexuality represents as great a threat to the world as ecological destruction. In fact Benedict carefully avoided saying anything of the sort, but did explicitly refer to Pope Paul VI’s famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view – 1968 Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, ‘Human Life’.⁵ In one sense it’s all very straightforward, consistent with St Paul’s chastisement of the Corinthian church, if somewhat confronting to us moderns - all forms of *porneia* threaten our membership of the body of Christ, our being temples of the Holy Spirit.

1 Hebrews 2:11

2 1 Corinthians 6:19

3 1 Corinthians 6:13

4 1 Corinthians 6:15

5 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081222_curia-romana_en.html

'Fornication' is, in fact, a very broad category. Though the Pope didn't spell it out – it wasn't necessary to his audience of prelates, bishops and other ecclesiastical bureaucrats - fornication, pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, masturbation of every kind, as well as that 20th century *bête noir*, contraception, are all equally condemned under the general category of fornication – which might come as a bit of a surprise to some. In a nutshell, if your sexual activity is not strictly for the purpose of procreation, stop it, or you will go blind!

Well I make no claim to a full understanding of the subtleties or complexity of *Humanae Vitae*, nor for that matter the vast and turgid treatises by the likes of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and others upon which this legal-theological-pastoral edifice is built. I suspect, however, that many would be surprised to discover that the very same Saint Thomas Aquinas tolerated prostitution because it was felt to be necessary to avoid a greater evil,⁶ the logic of which is similar to the church's blessing of the 'just war', similarly considered the lesser of two evils. What does seem painfully obvious however - to those outside the church at least! - is that the church has a distinctly unhealthy and highly questionable obsession with everything to do with sex. What are Christians hiding, people wonder. True, all forms of *porneia* are capable of demeaning human dignity and polluting the earthly temple of the Divine presence. Yet I have worked with married women whose experience of church-sanctioned pro-creative sex with their legal husbands has been for them degrading, violent, abusive. Whatever it was in Corinth that Paul felt the need to sort out, the Jesus who he followed seemed little interested. Prostitution, certainly, was widespread and common in Jesus' world, yet he has hardly a thing to say about it. In stark contrast to Paul, Jesus was intensely interested in justice, equity, and the use of money and power and position, the same fundamental interest as the great Hebrew prophets before him.

So I think it's the rank unevenness, and its lack of congruence with the spirit of Jesus, in the church's obsessive interest in *porneia* which exposes us Christians to censure and ridicule. For the fact is that our being members of the body of Christ is equally threatened by a great many things, and especially our use of money, power, possession and position. This sacred temple of the Holy Spirit is threatened with defilement by the yawning chasm between the rich and the poor, by the millions starving to death today while I feast, by my refusal to forgive, my disinterest or carelessness in the face of another's suffering. If condemnation of wealth and property and the taking of interest on loans, and the neglect of the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee, and Christian nations' appeal to 'just war' (which is nothing other than state-sanctioned murder), was condemned just as thoroughly and exhaustively as condemnation of *porneia* then perhaps we might be taken more seriously.

So returning to the very simple, practical pastoral question, is it possible for us to foster a relationship with those engaged in *porneia* without giving the impression of condoning sin, given that the Bible appears to speak very clearly on the subject? The first response must surely be that we can hardly presume to know who is or is not engaged in *porneia* in its fullest meaning, so whose sin are we supposedly condoning! But there is a yet more critical matter.

Is it possible to minister to a person who works in a bank or in any of the expansive financial services industries without giving the impression of condoning usury? Or is it possible to minister to a person who works for the military without giving the impression of condoning murder? Or is it possible to minister to anyone who owns any property of any kind without giving the impression of condoning systemic poverty and neglect of the Biblical principle of Sabbath economics? The list of such questions could go on for some time! We do well to remember that all of us are only temples of the Holy Spirit insofar as it is Christ's will for us to be so. We do not make ourselves worthy of being members of the body of Christ because we have no sin, but because Christ desires us to be so in spite of our human frailty.

Thus, we do not minister to money managers expecting them to cease their trade, even though it imperils their membership of the body of Christ. Yet in the revealing of their status as temples of the Holy Spirit we can surely expect that this will transform the practical detail of their lives. In like manner, we do not minister to prostitutes expecting them to cease their trade, even though we know it imperils their membership in Christ. Yet in the revealing of their status as temples of the Holy Spirit we can surely expect that this will transform lives.

So my answer – borrowing from the US President-elect - is 'Yes, we can!'

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