

WHO ARE YOU?

Epiphany 3 Year B

Jon. 3:1-5; Ps. 62:5-12; 1 Cor. 7:29-31, Mk. 1:14-20

Gladstone 24/01/2021

During my later college years, one of the subjects I enjoyed the most was the subject of philosophy. One of the reasons for this was that most of the other subjects I was doing, I had done at least once before, if not twice before. If you want to know how that came about, you can ask me later—maybe I'm just a slow learner, who knows? Learning, not just the history side of philosophy, or learning about the great philosophers of the world, the practice of philosophy is great in helping a person develop logical thought patterns in dealing with complicated issues—not to mention enabling one to think deeply in important matters. It helps with process.

Philosophy is both an art and a science—a bit like preaching, in a way. Philosophy is sometimes decried in some Christian circles, but most of the best theologians throughout history were philosophers first. And in times gone by, the highest form of philosophy was, in fact, theology. If you're still not sure about it, think of it this way: philosophy does not tell you what to think, it teaches you how to think.

Now, I'm telling you all of this to set the following scene. One of the most interesting and thought provoking books I have read in the discipline of philosophy, is the book titled, *Sophie's World*, by the Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder. *Sophie's World* is, or has been on the international best-selling list and has won numerous literary awards. *Sophie's World* is a must for anyone who likes to think deep philosophical thoughts—and isn't that all of us?

Without going in to too many details, the book concerns a young fourteen year old girl called Sophie who undertakes a correspondence course in philosophy. At the beginning of the book, Sophie receives a mysterious letter. On the sheet inside is written the single question, "Who are you?" It's the answer to this question that the rest of the book attempts to address. Sound boring? Absolutely not! The story seems straight forward enough until a series of unusual things begin to happen. Over a period of time, the two main characters, Sophie and her philosophy tutor, begin to question the nature of their very own existence. If you want to know more, you'll have to read the book yourself. I have a copy, if you're interested.

Now, at first glance, there may not appear to be too much in common between the subject of *Sophie's World* and the text that we have before us from 1 Corinthians, but it seems to me that both of them, in their own way attempt to wrestle with consequences of the same question, "Who are you?" In the knowledge of the revelation of God's action in Christ on our behalf and for our sakes, "Who are you?" Having been saved from the consequences

of sin and having available to you, new life in Christ, “Who are you?” Having been partakers of baptism and the celebration of the Eucharist, “Who are you?”

After we have answered that question for ourselves, there is one more question we must ask. And that is: “As a consequence of knowing who you are, how then should you live your life?” What will be your priorities? How will you relate to the world around you? In other words: How does who you are, affect what you do?

Perhaps at the outset we need to dispel a few misunderstandings. Paul is not, in this passage, advocating a stand against marriage. He is not advocating that Christians should never mourn. He is not saying that Christians should never own anything, or that Christians should not have any dealings with the world. And he is not necessarily suggesting that the end of the world will be soon. Rather, what Paul is saying here, is that, as we have been given the revelation of God’s action in the world in the salvation of humanity—an action that culminates in the Incarnation of Christ, his death, resurrection and ascension—we need to ask ourselves, how we should then relate to the world in which we live? In other words, in what way does our knowledge of God’s redemption affect who we are and how we relate to the world?

The first thing we need to consider as we attempt to answer this question is to acknowledge that Christ’s act of redemption *does indeed* govern the way in which Christians view the world. The way in which we view the world and relate to it, as Christians, is not governed by what we know of the world but is governed by what we know of Christ’s work of salvation. Because of what Christ has done on the cross, we have a new perspective on the world and the way in which we should relate to it.

For those who are outside of the church, the focus of life and meaning is gained from oneself, from the things of the world and the relationship one has with it and with others. Basically, those outside the church live only in the context and knowledge of the world around them. The world is there to be used and sometimes abused, and life’s pleasures are to be found in what the world has to offer. Fulfilment is then found in the finite circumstances of the world in which we all live.

Christians, on the other hand, realise that the world must not be the focus of their wholehearted attention. Life’s meaning is not to be found in the things of the world, nor is it found in our own self-understanding. For Christians, the focus of our existence and the meaning of our lives comes from beyond this world—from the One who created it, sustains it and more importantly for us, the One who redeemed it.

Therefore, we no longer relate to the world the way everybody else does. Our understanding of the world is based on the knowledge that it, along with us, was created

by God and, being in a fallen state, has been redeemed by Christ. It is also based on the knowledge that at the time already appointed by God, God will bring this world into final judgement. Therefore, Christians are to live for God, in Christ, rather than living for themselves, in the world.

Paul tells us that “the appointed time has grown short.” This is not to say that this final culmination of which he speaks is necessarily going to happen soon, or even in the foreseeable future. What he means is that because Christ has died, has risen and is now seated at the right hand of God, God has then set the appointed time for judgement and the final culmination of the world. Because of God’s action in Christ, the final consummation of the world is predetermined and certain.

Therefore, since we have knowledge of this event, because it has been revealed to us in Christ, we can no longer live as though it is never going to happen. Our knowledge of the final judgement of the world, therefore, determines the means by which we should live our lives. Knowledge of the future governs our actions of today.

Becoming a Christian does not mean that you have arrived. It is not the only thing that we have to consider. Therefore, we should not be complacent in our attitude towards the world in which we live, but should live in a manner that puts the world in its perspective. We must treat the eternal as being more important as the temporal.

But this does not mean that we should separate ourselves from the world. We are not to be “aloof” from the world—that is, to consider it of no importance and therefore, disregard it. Nor are we to attempt to escape from the world—either by asceticism or by death. We cannot live as if the world does not exist. We cannot live attempting to escape the evils of the world. We should live, as Paul puts it elsewhere, *in* the world but not of it. It does not hold for us the essence of our existence.

Therefore, the Christian is to live in the world, looking to Christ for the fulfilment of our life’s expectations. Expectations that lead us beyond this world, and into the next.

Paul then goes on to give us a very good reason why it’s necessary for us to regard the world in this way. Simply, it’s because the world, in its present form, is passing away.

For those who are in Christ, the world can hold no lasting attraction. It’s here for a few millennia and then it’s gone. After all, what’s a few millennia between friends. Certainly not very much when you consider the eternity of God.

Paul goes on to point out that, as a result of Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, God has already determined the future of the world. You could say that Christ’s death,

resurrection and ascension was the beginning of the end. And just as those of faith are predestined in Christ to be God's sons and daughters, so in Christ, the future of the world has already been predetermined. The countdown has begun. Time is running out. God has already brought the world, in its present form, under judgement and that judgement will come at the appointed time.

All of these things that Paul mentions: marriage/celebrity, sorrowing/rejoicing, buying/using—all of these things belong to the world in its present form. These things may or may not be done, but either way they belong to what is passing away. Our focus, therefore, must be on what is eternal.

As you no doubt are aware, the coming of Christ into the world was not only a sign for salvation but was also a sign for judgement. Salvation and judgement go together. It's only by the grace of God that they did not happen together, the moment Christ ascended into heaven. We have been granted more time. But that time is not never ending. From the moment Christ's human work in this world was completed, the future judgement of the world was set, and we are moving towards that time.

Paul's admonition to us, then, is that we might look beyond this world and look to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. It's not wrong to be married. It's not wrong to mourn. It's not wrong to possess things. It's not wrong to have dealings with the world. But it *is* wrong to consider that these things will be everlasting or that ultimate fulfilment will be found in them.

Who are you? When we come to understand who we are, in Christ—when we come to understand the temporal nature of the world—we realise that we can no longer relate to the world on its own terms. We relate to it instead as those who are merely passing through to a more glorious life. A life that looks for its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, the redeemer of all.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.