

7 September 2008 It's now that matters Romans 13:8-14; Matt 18: 15-20

Owe no-one anything, says St Paul.

It's an interesting idea in a time when according to the financial pundits your average Briton has more credit card debt, more debt of all kinds in fact, than anyone else in the western world. And it's easy to see how it happens, because we've been seduced with easy credit for years – at least until now and the credit crunch. Even vicars like me get letters through the post offering me an American Express gold card, leaving me wondering if they have any idea what vicars earn, or even if they care.

But of course, in the ancient world debt was an even more serious business. Because if you couldn't pay they didn't just send in the bailiffs and take your stuff – your flat-screen TV, your laptop or even your house, they took you. Debt led to literal enslavement. That's why Paul's language of redemption really hit home, because if you found yourself in the slave market being inspected by potential owners like you were a horse or a piece of furniture, you prayed to every god you knew that some kind friend would come and literally redeem you. Buy you out of the market and give you your freedom back.

So Paul says again and again: don't be enslaved to anything. Don't owe anyone anything, except – and here his argument takes a really clever twist – the debt of love. And this is a debt with a difference because, unlike your monthly visa bill (hopefully) you don't ever pay it off. Paul says love fulfils the Law, but there's never any sense of job done, that's it. This is a debt that isn't paid off with the mortgage, or stops when the kids leave home, or over when we can't work in the ways we used to or do the things that we did.

Our liturgy says: our life and yours are bound together in a wonderful exchange, in a way that suggests almost a continual commerce between God and us. And I'm invited to really enter into that exchange, not just as a passive recipient of love and forgiveness, but as a channel through which those things will flow into the world. So I don't just bank up all this love and forgiveness for me. Freely you have received, so freely give.

But no-one, neither Paul nor Jesus, pretends this is easy. What if people don't want my love? What if I try to offer forgiveness or to be reconciled to someone and they don't want to know? How much does that hurt when it happens to us? But Paul and Jesus both say, this is how it is. In a world of fragile people where for so many our wounds lie painfully close to the surface, we will hurt and be hurt. Nothing in the Bible tells us to expect anything else.

Paul falls out with the Corinthians. Paul falls out with lots of people, but with the Corinthians especially. A challenge to his conflict management skills comes early on when it turns out that at the Eucharist the Barnton Corinthians are bringing Waitrose hampers which they scoff themselves, whilst the less fortunate turn up with a pot noodle and a packet of crisps. So Paul has to sort them out, and remind them whose feast this is and what it means. This is the feast for the poor, this is the feast for all, this is the feast where love of neighbour is acted out by sharing.

But conflict doesn't seem to worry Paul or Jesus. On the contrary conflict again and again provides a spark that lets something new burst into life. If Paul hadn't gone into a head to head with Peter and the other apostles, demanding the right to set the Gospel free for everyone, we would none of us be here. If Jesus hadn't got himself into trouble in the synagogue in his home town, and into trouble again and again and again until he's standing before Pontius Pilate and Herod for the final confrontation, the liberating news that love is the only debt a human being really owes wouldn't be ours.

So Jesus says, when conflict arises, don't avoid issues with people, but bring things into the light and try your best to be reconciled, and do it now.

Because for Paul and Jesus it's now that matters. You know what time it is, Paul tells the Romans, meaning the reign of God has already begun and the clock is ticking, so live like this is so. And maybe so should we, even if we don't look for literal end times. Whatever lies to hand in the loving and forgiving business, do it now. Don't just pay the debt of love and forgiveness in a kind of reluctant way, but do what God does and overflow.

Just like the Bishop in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* who provides shelter for the fugitive Jean Valjean on the run from the merciless judgement of the officer of the law, Javert, who's sworn on his life to make sure Jean pays the full price in years for the loaf of bread he stole. By night the desperate Jean steals some of the Bishop's silver and makes off under cover of darkness, only to be caught by local gendarmes and dragged before the Bishop next morning. But the Bishop knows what the Gospel means and, going over to his sideboard and taking out two silver candlesticks, he says to Jean before his captors: But my dear friend, the silver was my gift. Here, you forgot these. Why did you leave the best behind?

For Jean this is the gift of his freedom, a literal redemption, a gift he can never repay except by a changed life – a loving life, a forgiving life. This is the wonderful exchange of our liturgy and it is the only debt we owe. Amen.