

## Not Really a Chameleon

Of the readings for today, the second one - Paul's letter to Corinthians - is probably the hardest to understand. The first reading from Isaiah 40 talks of God's infinite love for humanity despite the fact that it may seem as if we are insignificant creatures in the entirety of creation and how with God we will not grow weary or faint while without God, we will tire and grow faint. The Psalm praises God for all that has been done for humanity, again despite the appearance of our insignificance in relation to the whole of creation. The Gospel reading from Mark reveals to us that Jesus is divine by His power over demons and His ability to cure diseases. It also shows us how Jesus remained faithful to His call to proclaim the message throughout the region and not just stay in Capernaum. So, I would like to concentrate on this reading from First Corinthians and in so doing, help to clarify our understanding of what Paul is telling us rather than leave us scratching our heads.

The troubling part is where, in the NRSV translation, Paul says he *became* "as a Jew" "as one outside the law" and "as one under the law," in short, he says he became all things to all people; seemingly using the argument that the 'end justifies the means.' Now since most English translations are based on the King James version, most translations maintain that language of 'becoming.' Is Paul a chameleon who will do or say anything to make the 'sale'? Is he just a slick salesman who'll do whatever it takes to make the sale?

The problem to our understanding this text lies in the translation. After all, Paul never stopped being Jewish as he still observed Jewish holidays and practices. So, he couldn't really 'become as a Jew' since he already was one. As to being under the law, Paul did follow the law and what it taught; both the

Jewish law and the law as Jesus 'redefined' it and pushed it implications. For being outside the law, Paul did not suddenly participate in all kinds of pagan rituals and idol worshipping. In fact, in chapter 8 from last week's reading, Paul said that he would not eat meat if it meant that someone new to the faith did not lose their faith. So how can we understand these verses so that they make sense?

When we take a look at the Greek in which Paul wrote his letters, we would hear that Paul put himself in the position of a Jew, in the position of one under the law, in the position of one outside the law, and in the position of one who is weak. He would have, as the saying goes, 'walked a mile in their moccasins' in order to see from where they were coming based on their experiences, thought processes - what they identified with. Paul followed the example of Jesus when Jesus walked alongside the disciples on the road to Emmaus that first Easter evening. Jesus met those disciples in their grief and from that grief explained why His death needed to happen. Paul is telling us that he met people where they were. He did this so that he could present the Good News in a way that would connect with them. For example, if one were to buy a car based on how it makes them feel, then Paul would emphasize that in his sales pitch. If one bought a car because of performance, then Paul would stress the performance characteristics of the car. Likewise, if someone approached belief from point of view of the law, Paul would stress how Jesus fulfills the law and eliminates the legalism that can arise from too much emphasis on following the law. If someone thought along the lines of Greek philosophical logic, then Paul would use that method for showing what Jesus means to the world.

When we mistranslate these verses, Paul does not come across in a very good light. He seems like he would do anything in order to get people to become

believers. It seems as if he is even bragging that he can be like a chameleon and become whatever he needs to become in order to win converts. However, when we look at the body of Paul's writings as well as even the other parts of this letter to the Corinthians, we see that Paul is not a chameleon, able to change his stripes when it suits him, but that he is so rooted in and committed to the Gospel of Jesus that he can adapt how he gives the message without straying from the message. Paul is like a teacher of today who recognizes that students have different learning styles and can adapt his teaching methods to those different styles so that everyone can learn of God's love through Jesus.

We could almost call Paul a chameleon for how he describes himself in today's reading from First Corinthians. However, when we look at the Greek and other writings from Paul, we see that he really is not a chameleon, but rather works to identify the yearnings and desires of the people to whom he is giving the Good News of Jesus by learning their ways so that he can truly empathize with them and put the Good News into terms with which they can relate. While he does not explicitly say that this is how we should fulfill our call of spreading the Good News of Jesus, he subtly points back to Jesus' example of meeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus after the Resurrection where they were. We, too, then can use this example of meeting people where they are so that we can see how the promises of the Good News of Jesus can meet their concerns. May the Holy Spirit guide us in meeting people where they are, helping us to learn to empathize with them and show them how the Good News of Jesus is for their sake.

In a short while, Quincie and Jace will come to the font to be received into the baptism of Jesus and with it receive the promises that Paul said that the people to whom he went would also receive. They will be received into the 'great cloud of witnesses' and receive gifts from the Holy Spirit to do God's will. As they grow, may their faith grow so that they may proclaim the good news to those who need to hear it, just as Paul did.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/9lhSzZfE00Q>

Service: <https://youtu.be/FcM-hJmVTt4>