

Christianity and Stoicism

One of the surprising developments in modern thought has been the revival of the ancient Greek philosophy of **stoicism**. Also surprisingly, this has happened not so much among the professional philosophers to be found in universities, but more often among the young and hip entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley. There has been, over the past twenty years or so, a proliferation of books by men like Tim Feriss and Ryan Holiday – both entrepreneurs from California – promoting the ideas of stoicism, offering, indeed, a sort of “Stoicism for Dummies” in which the ideas of Zeno of Citium, Chrysippus of Soli, Socrates and Marcus Aurelius to name just a few, are distilled into counsels for living a happy and productive life in the rat-race of the twenty-first century. They certainly seem to offer a paradise on earth: just look at the title of Ryan Feriss’s most popular book, *The Four-Hour Working Week*, though I honestly doubt that Feriss would ever have got the book published had he really worked just four hours a week.

I raise this topic of stoicism because, at first sight, our second reading this morning, from Paul to the Corinthians, seems to have an aroma of stoicism. The stoics taught, famously, detachment: that happiness was to be found not in the acquisition of things, nor in power, nor fame, but simply in accepting fate: what Nietzsche would later call *amor fati*, the love of fate.

Now St Paul writes,

... those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for; those who are enjoying life should live as though there were nothing to laugh about; those whose life is buying things should live as though they had nothing

of their own; and those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it.

This does sound rather stoic, and I would not for a moment deny that Paul was influenced by stoic ideas. There is much to admire in stoicism, and in many ways its concern with virtue, particularly the cardinal virtues (as Plato described them) of Wisdom, Courage, Justice and Temperance – overlaps Christian teaching in a positive way.

What strikingly differs from stoicism in this passage from St Paul, however, is the reason he gives for living in this way: *I say this because the world as we know it is passing away.*

The stoics had no such idea. For them, the universe was eternal, even if it went through cycles of growth and decay. For them, the task was to find peace and serenity in a world that was changing by accommodating oneself to that change. As Descartes – who was not a stoic as such, but was certainly influenced by stoic ideas – put it, “One should change one’s thoughts rather than try to change the world.”

This is not what Paul is saying. The stoic has no idea of the life to come and seeks only to find peace and serenity within. The Christian understands that this world will come to an end, and therefore too must develop a certain detachment from its allure, but he or she cannot find an internal peace just by withdrawing: the Christian is bound by love of others, and believes that there will be a judgement where each of us will hear, “Whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.”

This is essentially why, I think personally, stoicism is so popular with the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley. It provides an illusion of a spirituality without the obligations, neither the obligations to God or to other people, that are found in the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount. For the Stoic, life was essentially about growing in knowledge through the use of reason, but, in the very next chapter of this Letter to the Corinthians – unfortunately it is not read on Sundays – Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but it is love that builds.” He goes on to give an example. The meat that had been sacrificed to idols was sold by the temples, but Jews were forbidden to eat it. Some Christians had taken to eating it, arguing that since there is only one God and these idols are nothing, it was a matter of indifference that the meat had been offered to them. *They* were not honouring these false gods by eating the meat. Paul tells them that they are forgetting one thing: that they are scandalising their fellow Christians and Jews. Their reasoning might be flawless, but in the circumstances of the day, charity towards others required that they not touch this meat tainted by idol worship.

There is so much more that could be said about Christianity and Stoicism – one could easily write a book about it. Many of the Stoic ideas are noble, many of its principles may bring us comfort and help us to endure hard times. But it falls far short of the consolation we have from our faith, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.