

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany

January 14, 2024

*The Matrix* tells the story of Thomas Anderson, who works a grey and boring job in a grey skyscraper in a grey city, somewhere in North America in 1999. In his off-hours however, Thomas is a computer hacker with the alias “Neo,” supplying services to shady figures on the wrong side of the law.

Then Neo meets the infamous hacker and terrorist known as Morpheus. Morpheus reveals that what Neo thinks is 1999 is actually a massive computer simulation created by Artificial Intelligences that have enslaved the human race. Morpheus offers him a choice of two pills: take the red pill, pierce the illusion, free yourself from the Matrix and join the resistance, or take the blue pill, and return to the Matrix with its illusion of freedom which is actually slavery.

The Corinthian church, says Paul, are opting for the blue pill.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Paul has presented it is about freedom. Humans are created for life with God, in the wonderful world that God has created. It is full of wonders and pleasures. But instead of experiencing God as present in every aspect of the world, humanity is seduced by the world and reduces it to simply a means for fulfilling their own desires. Instead of life with God in the world, they choose life in and with the

world to the exclusion of God. This truth is depicted in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Fortunately, as described in the Old Testament, God provides the Law of Moses to his people Israel: a set of rules and rituals to live by to help us orient every moment of our lives toward God. But, says, Paul, the Bible describes how, time and again, we have found the Law too difficult to live up to. Not only do we continue to turn away from God, but the Law shows just how far we have gone astray; just how much we have enslaved ourselves to our own desires. The consequence is a life that ends up being less full and meaningful than it could have been.

God's solution is Jesus Christ: we are united to God in Christ, who shares our death, makes us one with him, and unites us to God in new life as we rise with him in resurrection. We are free from the necessity of following the Law. This salvation is now offered to all people, Jew and Gentile alike. We are invited to claim this salvation, to live this salvation, to experience the way it frees our wills from slavery to our own needs and desires. It raises our eyes to the bigger world that we are a part of. At some point in the future, God will remake the world and remake us. Everyone and everything will live in perfect union with God. Our physical bodies will pass away and be remade as spiritual bodies.

The Greco-Roman culture of Corinth values freedom highly: the free man, able to do as he chooses, is the philosophical ideal. This Gospel that Paul has presented gives

them this freedom: The Corinthians seize on this freedom and miss that it is *freedom in Christ*. They are free! They are free to engage in all sorts of pleasures that Greek culture frowns upon, because, hey, they are free. “This is great!” say the men. “I’m off to the brothel!”

“Oops,” says Paul.

“Not only that,” they continue, “but you say God is going to destroy all these dirty and sinful bodies anyway, so it’s a ‘What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas’ situation, right? Christianity is awesome!”

“Oops,” says Paul again.

Western society is the inheritor of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition; we, also, value freedom highly. Many of the fiercest debates of the last few years have been about freedom, particularly bodily freedom, in a complex society where we also have mutual responsibilities. Should we be free to love whoever we want? To define our gender for ourselves, defying cultural norms? Do we have bodily autonomy when it comes to abortions and contraception? What about bodily autonomy in refusing vaccinations? Should the government regulate or incentivize my consumption patterns, if it means slowing down climate change? Absolutizing freedom means denying responsibility to anyone or anything outside of ourselves.

*The Matrix* has cool outfits and gunfights and martial arts, but it's also a meditation on the paradoxical nature of freedom.

Neo chooses freedom, taking the red pill. When he wakes up to the real world, he finds that freedom entails hiding with the last remnants of humanity in tunnels under the Earth, dodging the AIs' hunter-killer robots. Their clothing is frayed, and their meals are unappetizing bowls of oatmeal-like slop.

Morpheus is a true believer in humanity's future, ready to sacrifice his own comfort and even his life to free humanity from their comfortable illusion. He's convinced that Neo has the potential to be humanity's saviour. His lieutenant, Trinity, wants to believe that Morpheus is right: right about the possibility of a brighter future, right about Neo. So she's willing to make sacrifices, too.

And then there's Cypher. Cypher bought what Morpheus was selling, but after months or years of living like a hunted rat in a tunnel, he's had enough. He doesn't believe in Morpheus' future anymore, he's seen the truth, and it doesn't hold a candle to the illusion.

As the rest of the crew is eating breakfast, we see Cypher in the Matrix, dining with Agents of the AIs and planning to betray Morpheus, Neo, Trinity and the rest. While they are eating slop, Cypher is enjoying the finest steak and red wine. He knows the food isn't real, but he doesn't care. In exchange for his treachery, Cypher wants to be

returned to the Matrix, to live in luxury as someone famous, and to forget everything that has happened. “Ignorance,” he says, “is bliss.”

In choosing comfort and the indulgence of every pleasure over freedom, Cypher is choosing a return to slavery. He knows this – though he wants to forget it.

This is what Paul is trying to explain to the Corinthians. They hold up freedom as their greatest ideal, but in choosing to misuse that freedom, they are tossing that freedom away. The knowledge that the Matrix is an illusion is what gives Cypher freedom. The knowledge of what God has done in Jesus is the basis of the Corinthians’ freedom. But, like Cypher, they want to toss that knowledge away. Like Cypher, in making personal pleasure their highest good, they are not exercising freedom: they are re-enslaving themselves to pleasure.

The second part of the Corinthians’ argument is that, if God is going to remake everything anyway, then what they do with their bodies on this side of the kingdom of God doesn’t matter. But Paul tries to explain to them that the you who is a physical body continues in the you who is the new spiritual body.

There’s scene early in the movie when Morpheus is teaching Neo martial arts. The technical knowledge of kung-fu has already been downloaded directly in Neo’s brain. But to match Morpheus – and more importantly, to match and exceed the Agents – Neo has to weaponize his knowledge of the Matrix’s illusory nature. Real human bodies can’t

leap the entire length of a dojo in a single bound or throw dozens of punches in a second; but in the Matrix, Neo's body is simply an extension of his mind.

Nevertheless, when Neo wakes up on the ship after their virtual sparring session, there is blood on his lip.

"I thought it wasn't real," he says.

"Your mind makes it real," Morpheus responds.

"If you're killed in the Matrix, you die here?"

"The body cannot live without the mind."

The kingdom of God that God is bringing into being through Jesus Christ is not radically separated from this world. It is not a new world; it is this world, though changed and perfected.

The world as it is now is not a temptation meant solely to distract us; neither is it a consequence-free playground. Either of these would mean that what happens here is irrelevant to us, to God, and to our salvation. Instead, the world is the place where we live and grow into the truth that we are part of the body of Christ.

Freedom is a gift from God. In deciding how to use this freedom, in deciding how to use our bodies, the question is always, "Does this choice shape me more, or less, into the image of Christ? Does this choice honour, or dishonour, my neighbour who is also part of my body, which is the body of Christ?"