

Sunday 31st January, 2021 - 4th Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

1 Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 8 - “Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”

Well, one thing is clear to me here - in order to say these words, I can tell that St. Paul has never had the pleasure of a fine dining experience!! Some years ago now, I was fortunate enough to be selected as a “guest consumer” judge for the Adelaide Wine Awards. The role involved selecting the winners of the best locally produced wines for the year - and required a full day of wine tasting - and let me tell you, we worked very hard!

Six wines in each category; from sparkling wines, through 3 different varieties of white wine, 4 varieties of reds, a dessert wine category, and topped off with 2 different classes of fortified wines...

And then the highlight - the reward was that we were all invited to a black-tie dinner, at which the winning wines were paired with a dinner course - all served in lavish luxury at the Convention Centre. That evening still rates as one of the all time food and wine highlights of my life, and I'd have to say, I felt *very* close to God as I enjoyed the whole experience!

So, I wonder, what does Paul actually mean in this passage. It might be easy for us to believe that he is being very literal here - after all, many of Paul's letters are full of practical instruction to the early Christians. And combined with our impression of Paul as a stickler for the rules, and a sense of his ascetic fervor we could easily

believe that his message to Corinth is exactly that - do not eat meat because it is bad to do so.

And while there may be some direct practical aspect to his message, it is more important that we situate his words within a wider context of the letter as a whole. As we see throughout the whole letter, Paul never conceives of the Christian as an independent individual who would take decisions that involve him or herself only. For Paul, those who follow Christ are first and foremost members of a community. They are enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect them to others. This interconnectedness is precisely the ultimate criterion for Paul. How one's behavior will influence the behavior of others is paramount.

Therefore, even if one knows that it is in fact not a problem to eat meat sacrificed to idols, one should not place one's correct knowledge above one's implication in the community. The good of the community comes before anything else. In other words, you can be right, or you can be in community!

Love for one another and for the community is what should guide every individual's actions. In this community, it is the opinion of the ones less certain in their faith that need to orient everyone's decisions. This is indeed how love should be understood in the Christ believers' communities.

Love in this context is of course not a romantic feeling, but it is also not some sweet, affectionate type of feeling. Love when it comes to the community is an active feeling that must be translated into acts and actions rather than in good feelings towards the others. For Paul, love in the community does not necessarily mean that you have to agree with everybody or how they understand the world. Rather you need to be aware of your own behavior in order to protect others, and remain in community; walking together in Christ.

As I reflected on this, I was reminded of the story of Florence Li Tim-Oi, the priest and missionary venerated in the Episcopal Church, whose feast day occurred this past week. Florence was the first woman to be ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Communion, on 25 January 1944. But prior to her ordination, she was ministering to Anglican communities in Macau, during the time of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and of parts of China. Even though Macau was neutral, it was impossible for any Priests to be posted there, and so Florence was given special dispensation, as a Deaconess to administer the sacraments, including Holy Communion. The Bishop of Hong Kong, Bishop Ronald Hall wrote the following to the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, William Temple: "I have given her permission to celebrate the Lord's Supper. If I could reach her physically I should ordain her priest rather than give her permission ... I'm not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am, however, determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the Church."

Here, the Bishop was enacting Paul's wisdom of how love should guide one's actions - and how being in community was far more important than being right - or even *feeling* as though you are right!

So, I wonder - what does it mean for us - are there situations in which being in community is better and more important than being right? I think this is key for us in our lives as Christians. Because it is all too easy to let judgment and criticism rule our actions, rather than for love be our filter. Indeed, as someone wise once said, we need to let love guide our interpretation of the Scriptures, rather than our interpretation of the scriptures inform our love.

As Paul says to the church in Corinth - "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." While it may be important for us to have a sound knowledge and understanding of the key principles of the Christian faith, it is far more important, it seems, to act with love and compassion in all that we do.

We see it time and time again in the life and ministry of Christ - how he puts love and mercy above doing what is expected in the eyes of the Jewish leaders of the time. How he touched the lepers; how he ate and drank with tax collectors and prostitutes; how he interacted with women, and those of other nationalities.

And today, he heals a man on the Sabbath - a clear violation of the Torah. But his motivation, as ever, came from a place of love. His need to love and care and heal took priority over the need to adhere to rules; to be seen as “right” in the eyes of the leaders.

Our wider Anglican communion is, at this time, fractured, perhaps even broken beyond repair. And it may just be my simplistic way of looking at things, but my sense is that many in our church are more concerned with being right than loving others. More worried about their moral superiority than engaging in meaningful dialogue and opening their horizons. More likely to turn away a seeker who does not follow their interpretation of the rules than to remain in communion with them and walk and learn together.

Paul says to the people of Corinth - love builds up. Let us build one another up as we seek God’s will for us. Let us be faithful, yes, but not rigid; let us be strong, but compassionate. And in it all, may we be marked by love, as Jesus was in his life and ministry. As our Collect for today says, so we pray:

God of compassion,
you have shown us in Christ
that your love is never ending:
enable us both to love you with all our heart
and to love one another as Christ loved us.
Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**