

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

The Faithful Art of Christian Compromise

Focus Sentence: True Christian knowledge is wisdom not intelligence or cleverness, Christian wisdom is rooted in love.

I'm guessing that whether or not to eat food sacrificed to idols is not the biggest concern in your Christian walk. Amid the myriad challenges of being a Christian today, this is not high on the list. (It is in some parts of the world still for Christians) but not here. For Paul though, back in the day, and his fledgling Corinthian church, it was. Temple worship of various gods and the associated sacrifices were common practice. The meat from the animal was cooked and eaten as part of the whole experience and the leftovers sold in the meat market. So the question was whether it was spiritually hazardous to buy and eat such food, or participate as one might with family and friends in the pagan meals once you had become a Christian and given allegiance to the one true God. Was the food tainted because of where it had come from? Or what it represented? Would it be tantamount to idolatry to partake? Paul gives quite some thought to answering, which tells us the question was important, perhaps on a few levels. Perhaps division was being created over the issue? Perhaps people were falling away from their faith and not knowing how to live faithfully in the world? Perhaps guilt and power were being used by people who wanted control in the new little church? One way or another, Paul addresses the issue head on and at some length. In doing so he reveals something about the nature of wisdom that has remained important for the church ever since. To this present day. In this case it has less to do with the particular issue at hand, more to do with how a Christian community lives together; how it responds to the challenges of being faithful in a complex world as a united body in Christ.

Let me say something shocking here which I'm sure you will all find scandalous. Christians are not very good at dealing with difficult issues together. No, really it's true. We're called to be a community of love, but that sadly falls by the wayside, often, for less than noble reasons. Personal agendas, politics, money, pride, power, control, the glee of winning an argument, you name it. It almost seems like we enjoy getting at each other sometimes. It's no wonder that so many TV shows and the like have so successfully parodied the church, we give them such good material. There was a famous (perhaps infamous) event in a Uniting Church meeting in Sydney some years ago now where two protagonists tried to wrench the microphone away from each other in order to speak... in Christian love of course. Paul is trying to help the Corinthians deal with the issue of food sacrificed to idols Christianly; that is, in a Christian way. He assumes that there is a Christ-centred way to go about doing this and as such offers us a window onto how the Gospel is worked out in the world of concrete ethical and social questions. We have much to take from this apparently obscure passage if we have eyes to see.

In this passage Paul helps gives us a lesson in the faithful art of Christian compromise. Compromise is one of those words that can have positive or negative connotations. On the negative side it can imply a slackening of principle, a kind of moral wishy washiness. ‘Oh he compromised himself.’, as the saying goes. He let himself down by not holding to what he knew was right. On the positive side compromise can reflect a willingness to hear and make room for the opinion of others, actually to be thoughtful and non dogmatic and open to seeing two sides of an argument. They came to a good compromise, we say, meaning that while no-one got everything they wanted, a fair and reasonable solution was found. For Paul, Christian compromise which is grounded in love, the love of God, and of one another, is a part of how we live together faithfully. It’s not only appropriate, but necessary, it’s a sign of who we are as a community of Christ. But there’s an art to it. It requires a kind of wisdom and discernment which is itself grounded in Jesus’ love and grace, which is itself garnered over a lifetime of learning to be together.

Like lots of ethical issues, there are a number of angles to the question of food sacrificed to idols for Paul. It’s not black and white. But in the big picture he takes a somewhat surprising position for a person of Jewish heritage. As there is only one true God, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, all the idols are really nothing at all. They are figments and delusions and mirages. They have no real power, so there’s no real danger in eating meat sacrificed to them as it’s all a game, a charade, a play act. Now of course idols can take on a certain power if we become infatuated with them, if we begin to worship things other than the one true God that is certainly a problem. That becomes idolatry. But meat in the market, don’t think of it for a second. It’s just meat. So, it’s from a theological standpoint that Paul says it’s okay. This is a kind of knowledge, a kind of understanding. It’s logical and sophisticated and reasonable, giving heed to the underlying truth of the God of all. In that sense it is a lesson to us that we wrestle with any ethical issue or question is by beginning in the truth of God as revealed in Christ. There’s no other ‘starting point’ in that regard, no other basis on which to reflect on the complexities of any ethical concern. So one might think this ends the conversation for Paul. Not quite eat, drink, and be merry, but certainly giving a licence not to be concerned that some great spiritual or religious boundary is being crossed.

But that doesn’t end the conversation. ‘Food does not bring us closer to God’, Paul writes (much to the chagrin of church catering committees down the centuries), ‘we are no better off if we do not eat, and no worse off if we do.’ ‘But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Be careful that the exercise of your rights, of your knowledge, does not become a stumbling block to the weak.’ Paul was concerned for those who might not understand so clearly as he. Or perhaps were new to the faith and still finding their way. Or perhaps had a history of eating in temples and struggled with the idea that it didn’t necessarily represent a threat to their new found faith if they understood it rightly. Should they get the wrong idea it could lead them astray, lead them away from Christ, and such a wound, Paul says, would be a wound to Christ

himself. It's very strong language, but the underlying point is clear. To wound a brother or sister in the faith is to wound Christ himself. All the theological justification and correctness in the world, as sophisticated and thoughtful as it might be, is worthless if we cause each other to stumble, especially those whose conscience is weak. As in all contexts, in the end, our love for one another must prevail, which is itself derivative of the love of God. The love of God must prevail. Look to each other's needs, Paul is saying. Put each other first. See the lives and struggles of others as part of your life and struggle, as you are all bound together in Christ as one church, one body. Paul will affirm this sentiment most powerfully of course in the 13th chapter where he will say, if I can speak in the tongues of men and angels, or fathom all mysteries and knowledge, if I have a faith that can move mountains, if I give all my possessions to the poor, but have not love, I am nothing. Without love, the church, and we as parts of it are nothing.

This requires some thoughtful attention as it works out within a community. Learning to compromise faithfully and live in love for one another and for God takes great wisdom, the wisdom of humility and grace. You'll notice that Paul doesn't actually tell them what to do. He doesn't prohibit eating the meat, rather he offers them pastoral guidelines as to how they might reflect on the whole context and move forward. Knowledge puffs up, he says, while love builds up. In another part of the letter he says everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. The freedom we have as Christians doesn't equate to a licence to do whatever we please, even if we can justify it theologically. We are free in the Lord, meaning that it is to him, his people, and his agenda of redeeming the world, that our freedom in faith should be directed, in worship, in prayer, in ethics, in all facets of life. On the other hand many Christian traditions have down the ages enforced very strict rules about the do's and don'ts of faith which in lots of cases has led to legalism and unhealthy power structures in the community. This is the opposite to licence; a legalism that revokes just about all freedom. Paul could have said, just don't eat the meat which might have been the simpler solution, but he recognises that a church must learn to live together through faithful compromise. He assumes interrelatedness, and conversation will take place. He assumes thoughtful discernment together will happen. And he assumes there is a peculiarly Christian way of going about it, which is grounded in the self giving love of God in Jesus. It is an ongoing negotiation among a community of faith which is informed by Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and assumes that every life, and every voice has a part to play. And slowly over time a community develops a kind of collective wisdom, a character, a pattern of being which looks to the need of everyone together.

The individualism of our day works against this kind of idea. We've grown used to thinking that what we do and how we live in the world is our own business. We can make our own choices without recourse to anyone else. It's yet another reason why it's hard being the church in our time. But as Rowan Williams says, we're not really individuals at all, that's a modern construct. We are persons. Persons made in the

image of God. And personhood implies relationship, relationship with one another, and relationship with our creator. What makes us persons is not our insistence on our own autonomy, our own way, but our willingness to nurture and be nurtured in relationship. That's how we grow into our true selves. From our infancy we rely on each other to survive and flourish. All Paul is really saying is that this is indicative of a wider reliance on God; the God who sees us in our weakness, meets us where we are in love by coming in our flesh, and redeems us from our broken and fragile ways. Now if this is how God looks on us, so it should be how we look on each other, for the sake of Christ. Love is its own kind of knowledge, a knowledge which holds head, heart, and life all together in one. And when we live in love, love of God, and of each other, we are known by God, Paul says, and God is working through us. Would that it be so for us here at Bowral and throughout our lives.

Amen.