

## The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 2021

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1: 21-28

The issue of authority is an interesting one in Anglicanism. During my preparation for ordination I was often told that *the* mark of the priesthood is obedience, but I was never quite sure to whom, or to what I should be obedient! During my early years of ordination I served with a number of clergy for whom the Bishop was to afford due reverence as a successor to the apostles, despite the fact that the very same clergy seemed to do everything they could to irritate him or ignore him in matters of liturgy and order!

So authority and where it is to be found in the Church is a vexed question, which continues to be contentious. For fear of generalization in the reformed tradition authority is to be found in the Scriptures, remember the reformation axiom 'Sola Scriptura' and in the Roman Catholic tradition in the Church's teaching, the Magisterium. For us as Anglican's, if we follow Richard Hooker the preeminent theologian of Anglicanism, authority is to be found in that important three legged balancing act: first in scripture, from there in human reason and then in tradition, perhaps better put as in the living voice of the Church.

In many ways our particular way of understanding authority helps us deal with this critical matter of individualism versus community, the one and the many. It helps us approach the issue of law and gospel. You might remember last Sunday I ventured to suggest that in our scriptures change, repentance, renewal were as much corporate matters as individual ones and that until we, as a Church, were at one in this fundamental element in our lives of faith we would fail to have a voice which would be heard in our nation and our world as we deal with the issues of our day. The problem that we experience in being heard is highlighted in today's gospel reading, it is a matter of authority and the way that we understand authority in our tradition. Jesus' audience listened to him, followed him, because he taught 'with authority.'

Our understanding of authority in today's readings begins with Jesus in the gospel. His teaching astonishes those in the synagogue because unlike the scribes it has 'authority.' Their teaching involved endless disputation about the meaning of the law, clearly they were not of one mind and their rulings simply created division. Jesus is single minded in his desire to liberate and unite. Many folk read the exorcism as the feature of this story, but it is not. It is indeed simply a sign of something greater, a sign of freedom from the shackles imposed by the religious authorities, a sign of unity.

Now if I had the answer to the issues of our unity and therefore our authority, I would of course have written lots of books, I probably wouldn't be here! But I believe that St Paul in this extraordinary passage from the Corinthian correspondence gives us some clues. In this passage Paul is responding to a debate within the Corinthian Church about whether or not to eat meat from the temple that has been sacrificed. If you visit the ancient ruins of the city of Sardis in Turkey you can experience this in architecture. An ancient 4<sup>th</sup> century church

nestled within the ruins of the temple of Artemis. I'm told too there is restaurant in Rome which is built around the ruins of an old temple. Two of the pillars are still visible. The restaurant makes a feature of them, and is proud of the ancient origins of the building where they now serve classic local cuisine, and wines.

What we don't normally realize is that in the ancient world the temples normally were the restaurants. Each town or city had plenty of shrines to local gods and goddesses, to the great divinities like Apollo or Venus, and, in Paul's day, more and more to the Roman emperor and members of his family. And what people did was come with animals for sacrifice. When the animal was killed, it would be cooked, and the family (depending on what sort of ritual it was) might have a meal with the meat as the centrepiece. But there was usually more meat than the worshippers could eat, and so other people would come to the temple and share in the food which had been offered to the god or the emperor.

But what has this got to do with us? You might well ask. Well Paul is trying to build a community and for him in Christian community love is to take precedence over freedom, freedoms have limits. Paul understands the group that goes to the restaurant – they don't believe in idols or emperor gods but they enjoy a good piece of steak! But what of those who find this difficult? They are members of the community too and love demands that they be taken seriously. Although Paul's sympathies lie with those of an Epicurean bent, he suggests that it is a fundamental wrong, a sin against Christ to ask folk to go against their conscience.

Another generation on from Richard Hooker and we meet another important Anglican Divine in Jeremy Taylor who wrote on the importance of conscience, another element in our understanding of authority, particularly in our Anglican context. By holding together these differing elements of authority - and we must hold them together, we can I believe live together, as is our calling.

Paul is not suggesting that we tiptoe around each other fearful of causing offense. Paul's letters consistently suggest that the Church is a forum for discourse. What he is suggesting is that those with conscientiously held views are to be cared for, respected, loved; we are to remain in community, one with another. The diversity of the Church is to be carefully and deliberately maintained.

This is what it has to do with us! We may not agree with other members of our Church community, but we are duty bound to care for those, as Paul says, for whom Christ has died. This is incredibly demanding, but it is the only way in which the church can fulfill its mission in the world. For St Paul this mission is not just about what we do but what we are. It is not just about being in a right relationship with God, but with each other. If we can demonstrate this kind of living together, a way that deals with difference, with freedoms and the limits on those freedoms, that engages with both individuals and community, then we will be able to speak with authority in the world, we will have a chance that our message will be heard in these fractious times, and the world might be a better place for it. Amen.