

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

Our second reading today is from St Paul's 1st letter to the newly formed church in Corinth. It is all about what to do about eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Paul is dictating a response to questions on a variety of matters which had come to him from people in the church. There was trouble and division in the new community. Paul had been responsible for setting up the group, so he knew it well, and no doubt felt a special connection with the people.

Now you might think that the concern about eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols is not very relevant to us today, and you would be right.

However, it is Paul's response to the concerns expressed that is relevant to us today. Paul's answers are really about what it means to be a Christian in his time, and for us, what it means to be a Christian today. It might be helpful if we had a little more background information before we consider what he had to say. I rather like the way the Good News bible describes Corinth. 'At that time Corinth was a great cosmopolitan Greek city the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It was noted for its thriving commerce, proud culture, widespread immorality, and variety of religions.'

Sounds a bit like Sydney! I love spending weekends in Sydney. I will be staying there next weekend with my daughter, Margaret, right in the centre of Newtown.

There is some urgency to Paul's response because practically every piece of meat for sale, or offered in a private home, had previously been sacrificed to a heathen idol. So, unless one was vegetarian, it was a problem. The other thing we need to know is that at this time in Greek and Roman societies people really believed in good and bad spirits, which were everywhere, and that idols really did have power for good and ill. Bad spirits could use food to get into a person and destroy his or her body and mind. Today's gospel speaks of Jesus commanding an evil spirit to come out of a man.

We also need to know that the animal was never fully consumed upon the altar, often all that was burned was a mere token part of it, sometimes as small as some of the hairs cut from the forehead of the animal. In a private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. First, a token part was burnt on the altar, second, the priests received as their so called rightful share the ribs, the ham and left side of the face. Probably the best parts!

Third, the worshipper received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet, especially for an occasion like a wedding.

So, what does a follower of Jesus do as a guest in someone's home, or when meat is purchased in the street?

Paul focuses on principles and practicalities, not tradition, not how it has always been done. He says the enlightened Christian need not worry about whether the meat had been sacrificed to a good or bad idol, because the new Christian teaching was that there was only one God, so the idols were false beliefs and didn't really exist. That was the teaching, but

then he adds a practicality. If you really believe that, then don't be too fussy. If you are a guest don't ask how the animal was killed, just eat it. However, if the host makes a point of saying the meat had been sacrificed to a pagan God, then the Christian should not eat it. But that is not the end of it. Now comes the most important consideration of all. If one is aware that one's actions will be misunderstood by those with a weaker conscience, I prefer the word 'understanding', of the theology of the Christian faith, and my enlightened free will actions might become a source of confusion for others, or lead them astray, then he, Paul, would stop eating meat altogether. He writes: Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.'(13)

In the next two chapters he goes on to invoke the principle of Christian freedom and liberty. He points out that there are many things that he is free to do, but he abstains from doing them for the sake of the Church.

He warns against the danger of being arrogant because of one's new and superior knowledge. Nothing ought to be judged solely from the point of view of tradition or of new Christian teaching and knowledge, everything ought to be judged from the point of view of love and concern for the welfare of others.

This advice from Paul seems to me to apply to us as we seek to live a Christlike life today.

Our conduct should always be defined by sympathetic and considerate love for those around us, so that our life and actions demonstrate caring and love to everyone we come into contact with.

This reflection on Paul's teaching has led me to consider what we should do about celebrating Australia Day on January 26th, the day Captain Phillip landed in Sydney Cove with his cargo of convicts. Having taken on board what Paul has to say about eating meat sacrificed to idols, I find myself compelled to reflect on whether or not we should continue to celebrate our national day on this day if we know, and we do know, that in the early years of settlement the indigenous people were treated badly, that they did lose their right to continue to live on land that been their land for generations. We do know that they lost their lives in unequal confrontations with the newcomers and settlers. We do know that adult men and women were separated from their children and had to work for meagre wages in jobs they probably didn't want to do.

I have also become much more mindful that the convicts had a pretty hard time, and that many of them would be separated from their own families for ever, often for very minor offences. Many of their families would be reduced to destitution and end up homeless or in the workhouse which was a terrible place to be.

I am now somewhat surprised to find that as a result of this reflection on Paul's response to the community in Corinth, my consciousness has been raised about our nation's beginnings, and I now believe that for all our sakes we should find another day to celebrate our nation.

That's simply my new position, but as Paul says, each one of us has to decide for ourselves what our own response should be to the issues of our day.

The fundamental principle which should govern our response is not tradition, not formal knowledge, but rather it is love and empathy towards all the people of our land.

Remember, the two great commandments given to us by Jesus. You and I are to love God with all our heart and mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. That's all we have to do, that's enough. And now all I have to do is share one of my favorite poems with you.

It is very inclusive and far reaching. It embodies the kind of Christian love I believe all of us are called to show in our lives. It does not let us off the hook. It applies to us all, perhaps, just as Paul's words applied to each person in the small Christian community in Corinth. It is about being very attentive to the present moment we are in, and the actual person or persons we are with. It challenges us, as Paul does, to live with our mind and heart in harmony.

Let us say it together, or just listen now and say it to yourself later in the day. Perhaps it will encourage us to be confident that when we try to live like this we will have met the needs of others, and loved enough.

Amen