

Prayer

Introduction

- Hands up those of you who are guilty of eating food sacrificed to idols...
- Have you ever caught someone else red handed in the process of eating food sacrificed to idols?

It seems not. So what on earth then is the relevance of this passage of scripture (the issue of whether or not Christians could eat food previously sacrificed to idols) for us in the year 2017 in Grahamstown? Maybe we should just ignore it, or more drastically take a pair of scissors and cut it out- along with some other choice passages that don't seem appropriate in our context here today?!

Before we give up on it, however, let us remind ourselves of some of the tools (basic steps) we have to help us in our interpretation of the scriptures, and see what message this passage of scripture might have for us today.

For those who have joined us in our series today, let me recap briefly:

To recap:

The first step we need to take is to ask what kind of “**Genre**” or type of literature we are dealing with – we have noted that this passage is part of a corrective letter written by Paul to the church at Corinth, dealing with issues facing the young church in the first century.

Acknowledging that this letter was written by Paul, the founder of the Corinthian church, to the Christians in that place, it is important that we consider something of the historical, social, cultural, religious context into which Paul wrote, to help us understand why he addressed his readership in this way.

Historical context

We have noted that the membership of the Corinthian church was made up of converts from a wide, diverse range of backgrounds, including many who came to faith in Jesus having previously been part of the worship practices of pagan cults.

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. This was both a public and a private ritual.

In the pagan world, animals would be sacrificed to their gods at the temples or shrines. In the case of a *private sacrifice*, a token part of the animal was burned at the altar; the priests received a portion; and the worshipper received the rest of the meat. With this meat, the worshipper would give a banquet – inviting friends either in his home or in the temple

The problem facing the Christians was this: *If a pagan friend invited them, could they participate in such feasts? Could they eat the meat that had been offered to an idol, a heathen god?*

If not, this would mean cutting themselves off from social occasions...

In *public sacrifice*, after the symbolic amount had been burned and the priests received their share, the rest of the meat fell to the magistrates and others. What was not used (left over meat) was sent to the markets, where anyone could buy it. This would mean that if a person bought meat at a market, it could have been previously offered to an idol or heathen god. *Could Christians risk buying and eating this meat?*

To complicate matters further, people believed strongly and fearfully in demons and evils, who were always trying to gain entry in a person's body to take control. They believed these spirits settled on the food a person ate, and so got inside of him. To avoid that, the pagans would dedicate the meat to one of their gods.

So what were the new Christians to do in the face of this problem which clearly pervaded all life, and needed to be settled in one way or the other? Could they take part in idol feasts – yes or no? Could they eat meat bought from the markets – yes or no?

No doubt the Jewish converts at Corinth would have objected to eating this meat, as a) it was tainted with idolatry b) the heathen would not have paid tithes on it c) it probably would not have been killed in the right way (strict kosher laws). The legalists (Cephas/Peter group) would argue: “Do what the law says”. Others might argue that in Christ they had been set free, and if they abstained from eating this food they would cut themselves off socially from everyone else at Corinth and this would hinder their attempts at effective evangelism.

What was Paul’s counsel in this tricky matter?

Taking Paul’s arguments as a whole, he clearly emphasises the freedom we have in Christ – yet acknowledging that with freedom, comes responsibility (sometimes it is better to voluntarily restrict our freedom for the sake of a weaker fellow Christian).

Let’s turn more closely now to the text.

- 1) Paul starts by stating a general principle: In all our dealings, Love is the most important thing

Read vs 1-3

Paul’s starting off point is to emphasize that in dealing with a difficult situation (grey area), **love** is what matters, not **knowledge**. In other words, love should control our sharing of knowledge – the manner/approach in which we say what we believe is right, is as much part of the truth as the knowledge we share. (eg *is it true, is it necessary, is it kind/loving?*)

Having knowledge on its own can make us proud and arrogant – “I know best, I am right” (*knowledge puffs up vs 1b*), whereas Christians need to be filled with love, because “love builds up”.

True knowledge must not lead to pride in what we know, but rather humility in what we do not know. Trying to impress others with theological niceties will achieve nothing, if not done in love. (*we need to be reminded of this in the way we debate, discuss, engage with grey areas in our faith, where matters are not necessarily clear cut as to what is right or wrong*). Our manner and approach must be characterized by love and humility.

2) Knowledge

What are the facts of the matter that Paul wishes to underline- what 'knowledge' does he wish to share in the matter regarding food sacrificed to idols?

In vs 4-6 Paul emphasises that whereas there may be many pagan so-called gods, they are only idols. Idols are nothing at all – they have no real existence. There is only one true God – that is “*the Father from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live*” (vs 6).

So on the one hand, if food has been sacrificed to an idol – so what? It means nothing. Therefore whether you eat the meat or not is irrelevant. “*food does not bring us near to God – we are no worse oif we do not eat, and no better if we do*” vs 8.

Yet on the other hand, not everyone knows this. (vs 7). Even though idols are not real – for many, they still believe they are. Maybe for new converts who have sacrificed food to idols when they were still pagans- for them to continue to eat this meat would not be helpful. They need to make a clean break from their former lives. It could send out the wrong message, be open to misinterpretation – others might see their behaviour and assume they were still pagans, or involved in demonic practices.

Now here we get to the principle of the matter:

Although on one level it doesn't matter if Christians eat food sacrificed to idols, on another level it does matter. Why?

Because this behaviour can pose a stumbling block to others in their new found faith, and that is not loving. *"Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak...For if anyone sees you eating in an idol's temple, won't he be embolden to eat eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brother in this way, you sin against Christ . vs 9-12*

He concludes by saying that if what a person eats causes a fellow Christian to fall, he will never eat meat again.

In chapter10: 14-31 Paul continues the discussion, emphasizing that whereas "Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial or constructive" (vs 23), and he repeats the warning: *"Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God..."(vs 32).*

That is most likely how Paul's original hearers would have understood his message in their historical context.

Principle

The final step in our interpretation (see yellow sheet) asks the question: is there a principle being taught that can be applied to our situation today?

Perhaps we could phrase Paul's principles in this way:

1)

Share knowledge with love and humility (so we build one another up rather than destroy one another)

2) Even if a particular action or behaviour is not wrong in itself (you have knowledge), don't do it if it is going to become a

stumbling block in another Christian's path, because that is not the way of love (love builds up)

What are some examples of how we might apply this principle?

Let me share two obvious examples to get us thinking (there are many more!).

Even in these examples I am aware that some of you will think "But that's not an issue at all" whereas for others it might be a big issue.

This might depend in part on our cultural background or particular Christian upbringing.

1)Dancing.

Is dancing in itself wrong? Does the Bible condemn it?

No- even King David danced before the Lord.

Yet for some Christians, it poses a problem. Why?

Perhaps because in some contexts it is associated with sexually provocative or promiscuous behaviour, drugs, alcohol, music with seductive or dubious lyrics.

So whereas dancing in itself is not wrong- in some situations I will gladly enjoy going to a dance or party with dancing, whereas on other occasions I will refrain from it.

(Scholars, students – a friend invites you to a party or disco. Do you go? Why/why not?)

Our PCC has been in discussion about having a church dance – whereas most are comfortable with the idea in principle, the consensus has been not to have one *during Lent*, as the timing of that might not be appropriate (season of fasting and penitence) and become a stumbling block for some.

2)Drinking/ the use of alcohol

Does the Bible indicate that it is wrong for Christians to drink alcohol?

Some denominations feel very strongly about this and ban it outright.

(The Anglican church does not take such a strong stand but advocates responsible drinking).

We know that Jesus himself turned water into wine for the enjoyment of the wedding guests at Cana in Galilee. Paul encouraged Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach and illnesses (1 Tim 5:23)

Having a glass of wine, beer or alcoholic drink clearly is not wrong in itself, however the Bible does speak a lot about drunkenness and the abuse of alcohol.

I might be a responsible drinker, but alcoholism is a big social problem. I need to be careful if and when I drink in public, so as to be sensitive to others and not cause another to stumble and fall.

Churches need to grapple sensitively with this one.

- What about having a parish “Cheese and Wine” social evening?
- Having a “Beer tent” at the church bazaar for fundraising purposes?
- Serving alcohol at a parish (Alpha) dinner?.
- Wine at the Eucharist – should we also offer grape juice (alcoholic parishoners, children)?
- *Students are invited to the Rat and Parrot or party. You know it may just become a big ‘booze up’. Do you go? Why/why not?*

In some contexts these are perfectly acceptable.

In others, **absolutely not!** For the church to be seen to promote or condone drinking in communities where alcohol abuse is a serious issue; or where Christians drinking in public is culturally inappropriate, it would be highly insensitive, send out the wrong message and even discredit our Christian witness. Let the exercise of our freedom not be a stumbling block for others.

The list is endless – appropriate dress (what is acceptable in some cultures is offensive in others), smoking, the way we speak to one another (first names/ more formal – how do we show respect) etc

Raises the difficult question: How far do we allow other people's 'weaknesses', beliefs, concerns to dictate to us how we may or may not live? That surely would be a good question for discussion!

The other danger in our discussions on these issues is that we can become too inward looking and focussed on these issues, with the result that we can forget the bigger picture of showing justice, mercy and the love of God.

Conclusion:

Let me be quite clear. This is not an invitation to look for fault, nit pick, criticize, point fingers, stand in judgement over one another. Of course not - That is not the way of love.

Rather it presents each one of us with a challenge to reflect on how we live our lives, exercise our freedom in Christ, in relation to others.

"Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial or constructive" (10:23),

It urges us to be more self-aware – consider how our actions and behaviour impact other people. It is a plea for the exercise of self-control, sensitivity, respect and courtesy towards one another.

For reflection:

Loving God, is there anything in my life you are asking me to change, or stop, for the sake of others? Anything that discredits my Christian witness? Am I in any way, through my words or actions, being a stumbling block for others and so sinning against you?

Are there ways in which we as a culturally diverse Cathedral family need to be more sensitive to one another in the way we behave in our corporate life together – is there anything we do that hinders our worship and witness and breaks down rather than builds up our life of faith?

