
Love Builds Up

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 28 January 2024

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 • 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 • Mark 1:21-28



MAY THE WORDS of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We have an interesting passage in First Corinthians today. We know that Paul is our great teacher of the New Testament; his letters make up a large proportion of it. He was a planter of churches in the first century, travelling around the eastern Mediterranean and making disciples and gathering them together into home churches and congregations. He stayed involved in the development of these churches through the writing of letters, many of which have survived through the centuries. Hence we have letters to the churches in Rome, Galatia, Philippi, Ephesus, Thessalonica and Corinth. The experiences of these early Christians in forming communities are not unlike those we have in today's church. Their problems are often familiar to us, and so Paul's letters still have

relevance for us. That is why we hear passages from them nearly every week of the year. They are still a useful study for modern Christians.

That being said, the passage this week might seem to be one of those that wouldn't mean too much to us. Paul is talking about food sacrificed to idols. There aren't many idol-worshippers around these days, in the sense Paul was talking about. We talk sometimes about those who worship money, or football, but that's not quite the same thing. No, Paul was talking about the old religions of some of Israel's neighbours, those who would carve bits of wood or metal into the shape of people or animals and then declare them to be gods worthy of worship. It is a common thread through the Old Testament. God tells his people to worship him, not lifeless bits of wood or metal which have no power to do anything, not even to speak or move around without being carried. Yet even in the shadow of Mt Sinai, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, the people below were fashioning gold idols to worship in place of the one true God. That memory remained with the Jews, and their historical documents and many of the psalms speak of these things.

At the time of Paul's letter, there were still idol-worshippers in the multicultural communities many Jews lived in. Apparently it happened that some meat sold in the open marketplaces could have formerly been part of animals which were sacrificed to idols, and observant Jews worried that they might eat such meat. It was specifically forbidden in the laws of Moses to do so. Yet with the advent of Christ, things had changed. Jesus declared all foods to be clean, wiping away many of the laws about food purity. It no longer mattered if an animal had been sacrificed to an idol, because idols have no power. They are just wood or metal, fashioned by humans.

But it was hard for some new Christians to immediately throw out such long-held beliefs. It was hard for them to embrace the freedom which Christ gives us to live in God's love, obeying simply the two great commandments to love God and love our neighbours. Paul recognises this difficulty, and does not want anyone to be made uncomfortable, particularly the newcomers to Christ, for fear of discouraging them in their new faith. So he speaks out about this, reminding Christians that their right to eat anything they want should not "become a stumbling block" to other Christians (1 Cor 8:9).

For we are all different. As Christians, we share many things, and as the Body of Christ we come together in Communion. We have a common

liturgy and traditions going back many centuries. We are no longer a small home church with a few dozen members, drawn from a single community, with similar backgrounds and history. We are a global church with members drawn from all over the world. We have different backgrounds, different opinions, different experiences of life which have shaped us into the people we are. We come together as the Body of Christ to share God's love, to build up and support each other, to be brothers and sisters.

But still, God made us all a little different, and what may be comfortable for some may not be so for others. One person likes quiet, contemplative worship; another likes loud music and more physical worship. These things are not important; they are matters of personal preference. That is one reason why there are so many different denominations: we don't all agree on how we like to worship our God. There are, of course, much weightier matters we may disagree on. Still, it's much more important to make our fellow Christians feel comfortable and welcome than to insist on our own way. A Christian community, such as a church congregation, is marked by the love and care its members show for each other. The community exists on the mutual love and respect of its members. As Paul says, "Love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1).

In an age of schism and division and the breaking-up of congregations and churches, we do well to remember Paul's advice. The church must retain its ability to compromise on minor issues as much as possible. It does this through the constant and deliberate choices of its members to respect other members' opinions and to maintain and grow that love which builds up each member of the body. The love we share comes from God, who loves us and wants us to live in faithful harmony with each other. Nothing can be gained by division, and everything by harmony. We have all of us received the great gift of God and the Spirit which enables us to build up the Body of Christ. Let us never forget that we are all made in the image of God, and respect and nurture that little bit of God in each of us. Amen.