

Love vs. Tradition

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Our culture has long been influenced by Christianity – our laws, customs, thinking, and even relationships are still moulded by Christian influence, even if significant numbers of people no longer identify as such. If our public holidays are not days of national significance, it is because they are days of Christian significance. Needless to say, that was not the case when Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians. Back then, Christianity was simply a weird little sect within Judaism.

It is also not the case for Christians in other countries. As you may know, I have lived in India for a year, where the Hindu faith is held by the majority and have also travelled in Nepal (both Hindu and Buddhist). Besides the obvious cultural differences, what I noticed was how much of their faith was evident on the streets. Homes and villages would hang up prayer flags. Prayer wheels were on the fences of street corners. Processions would celebrate their faith on the streets. It was not just these majority faiths that were accepted to do this – but all faiths, including Christianity.

One incident at the end of my time in India gave me a particular insight into today's Epistle reading. I had a sari that I liked, but had been damaged and a Christian friend had a dress that I wanted copied. So we went together to her tailor – I needed my friend to translate for me.

The tailor listened to what we wanted, took my vital statistics, then disappeared. When she came back, she had two plates of food to give us. Knowing the culture, I started eating straight away and as I finished, I looked at my Indian friend, who had not yet started. She said to me "I don't know if I should eat this – it might have been offered to the household idols."

Food that might have been offered to the household gods – it's not something that we generally have to worry about in Australia. We might be concerned about whether the meat animals were treated humanely, or eat vegetarian to reduce the impact on the environment, but this is as close as we get to the quandary. For the Christians of Corinth, this was quite a problem.

The Corinthian church was facing a lot of issues that created division and this is only one. We have skipped over the Epistle reading for the last two weeks, because I felt they both needed some commentary rather than just leaving them as a reading (and I wanted to focus our thoughts elsewhere). However, if we read from chapter three onwards, we would have heard a range of divisions that were occurring between the church members. These conflicts included debate about which apostles the individual members followed, dealing with family problems, and lawsuits. In short, the problem they faced was people with the opinion that they could do anything they liked because God would forgive them. Their faith did not change the way they lived their lives.

Paul unequivocally tells them this approach is not right. He says it again in his later letter to the Romans, where he asks "What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!" It almost becomes a repeated refrain in Romans and we see the early working out of this understanding here in the letter to the Corinthians. Sin, Paul tells the Corinthians, is doing what damages relationship with other people – either your relationship with them or their relationship with God.

However, there is another problem the Corinthian church faced and we miss this completely reading the letter because of our cultural differences. Meat was only a common meal for the obscenely rich (think about our billionaires today). The well-off would eat meat periodically and to put it in today's terms, this would be something like the equivalent of a Rotary meeting, but held at the local temple in their dining room. Like Rotary today, it was important because it built connections between the people in business. Unlike Rotary, there was a religious aspect and one had to be of a certain class to join. These gatherings were only available for the rather well-off of their day.

To put it in today's perspective (in proportions of the population), it was as if the residents of let's say Claremont, Nedlands, and Dalkeith were able to go to a weekly business dinner where they would be able to have a meal that includes meat. The rest of the time, they probably would not be eating meat other than fish. Would you go to it? Remember it is not just a business dinner, it is also a religious affair for another religion.

There are plenty of ways to justify this. We have our education that we can fall back upon. We know the idols being worshiped are not gods. We can quietly give thanks to our Christian God while eating this meal. We can say this gives us an opportunity to share our faith with people outside the church. And we have probably worked our way through these arguments because we need to do so.

However, those who are less well-off would not have been welcome at these meals. Small traders, day labourers, weavers, slaves, fishermen, they were all excluded. To put it in today's framework, this might be the teachers, health professionals, mechanics, electricians, are not welcome. This is the majority of the population who cannot go to the meals. The only time they get to eat meat is when it is given out by the temples for a special occasion – something a bit like our modern Christmas hamper and probably a similar frequency.

This group of people have not usually needed to think through the eating of meat; they were also the less educated and more open to popular culture (or in today's terms, the conspiracy theories and such like). What might it mean for their faith to see someone they know from church sitting in a temple dining room and eating?

Our lectionary readings though Corinthians gets interrupted by Lent, so we never hear Paul's resolution to this. Because of this, I will read it to you. Take a moment to strip away the usual romanticised context for hearing these verses and listen to them in the context of a church in the midst of these conflicts that I have mentioned. How do they change the way we respond to differences of opinion, what do they mean for how we care for each other as a church?

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part,

and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.