

*The freedom of love*

Well, our passage from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is surely a test for any preacher. It's all about ancient practices that had to do with ancient religions in the ancient city of Corinth, and it was all to do with temples and with meat that had been offered in them to idols and what a Christian attitude to all that should be, and to be honest I doubt if these are issues that lie heavily upon your heart this morning. I doubt if you came to church this morning over-vexed about whether or not to buy from the meat-offered-to-idols counter in the Albert Heijn. Here is one of those passages that strengthen the prejudice that the Bible is outdated and incomprehensible and certainly irrelevant to our world today. Well, maybe... but maybe not, and let's just see what we can make of all this stuff about temples and idols and meat and see if God might yet have something to say to us.

To begin with, we'd better get some clear sense of what this is all about and the situation seems to be thus. The city of ancient Corinth was an amazingly cosmopolitan city at the very epicentre of various trade routes and it was another one of these cities, like the city of Ninevah that we looked at last week, that made Amsterdam look like Disneyland. There was some serious vice going on in Corinth and it was not the easiest place to be the church of Jesus Christ for there was plenty to distract you and to lead you astray. One feature of the city was its ancient pagan religion which its temples where meat was offered to idols and this is what posed such a problem to the good Christians of Corinth. You see, these temples with their idols were not just places of worship – like our church they were also places with a social side, where people met and networked and did a spot of business. And sometimes feasts were held there and it was important to be there if you wanted to make the right contacts. But attending those business dinners involved eating meat that had been offered to idols. Should Christians do that? Was that not to offer reverence and respect to other gods rather than the only true living God of Jesus Christ? But it wasn't just that. Some of that meat that had been offered to idols was also on sale in the marketplace in Corinth. Again, should Christians eat such food or was such food infected by having been offered to idols and used in the service of pagan temples?

Paul is quite clear. There is nothing wrong with eating such meat. To suggest otherwise was to attribute too much significance to idols, to ascribe them too much status. Paul is adamant that there is only one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ and it is that God and that God alone who is going to influence our lives and our decisions and not tin-pot temple idols. And here of course Paul gets to the very heart of the Christian Gospel – that to acknowledge the one, sovereign, exalted Lord over all things is actually an act of liberation, of freedom, because to recognise that God to set us free from every other god or lord. There is this half-baked idea that some atheists have that to acknowledge God is somehow to surrender your freedom and to enslave yourself - when in fact the very opposite is the case. For to acknowledge the true and sovereign God is to renounce and to deny every other god that would constrain or rule our lives. And that is an act of emancipation, of liberation. And salvation at its heart is liberation! To serve God is perfect freedom! So Paul says in effect go ahead and eat your idol meat and acknowledge the true and living God. This the glorious liberty of the people of God!

Having said all that, however, there is more to be said, for freedom has to be handled responsibly, otherwise it can mean captivity for someone else. And here we have to return to the idols of Corinth and recognise that there was a certain ‘class’ dimension to this scenario in Corinth which rather complicates things. Put it this way. The kind of people who were being invited to swanky feasts and dinners in the temple where they could network and exchange business cards tended to be the more wealthy, educated, sophisticated, urbane members of the Christian community. And it would have been discourteous of them to refuse such invitations or to refuse to eat the meat, and anyway they were less likely to attach any great significance to the fact that this meat had been offered to idols. They were more educated and less prone to investing great significance in idols and they were therefore quite comfortable doing it. Having said all that, however, the cult of pagan worship in Corinth was powerful. It had a strong attraction and could too easily take hold of people and suck them in - and especially poorer, less educated, less informed people. If they were attending meals in the temple or buying this meat at street markets the danger was that they might be drawn back into pagan belief and worship – and they would end up back in captivity. They weren’t as strong and resistant as the wealthier more educated class, and so Paul asks for sensitivity towards

these weaker and more vulnerable brothers and sisters. In other words what Paul is saying is that freedom has to be tempered by love. At times freedom has to be constrained and limited.

Think of one obvious example of this. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the good news of forgiveness of sins. God forgives, praise the Lord! But you know what people often say – so in that case aren't I free to sin as much as I want? Why not just trade on God's endless grace. God will forgive! Well, the answer is – yes, we are free to sin as much as we want. We can abuse God's forgiveness and God will go on forgiving, such is the measure of God. But where is love? Does love not constrain us? And of course to use our freedom that way only lands us in captivity for as we've said, to love God is perfect freedom and to sin is to surrender to bondage.

Let's extend this, however, to a very contemporary issue that has dominated our news in recent weeks – the issue of freedom of speech. Now, this is one of the great sacred cows of the modern age – the right to freedom of speech – and it lies at the very heart of liberal democracy and it must be protected at all costs. After all, people laid down their lives for the cause of free speech. And so after the recent wicked murders of the Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris there was this great show of strength by the leaders of liberal, democratic nations standing in solidarity with those who had been murdered and their loved ones. And that's all right and good no doubt, but it raises a question – where does love come into all this, or does it have no place at all in the rough and tumble of modern, secular politics? Where does love's concern for the weak come into the picture? Dare we use that language?

You see the thing about satire – the kind of ridiculing and mocking that Charlie Hebdo engages in - is that it targets the powerful, and the powerful need targeting because they need to be laughed at. Indeed there is a divine mandate for satire in the Bible and you'll find it in Psalm 2. Take a read of Psalm 2 sometime. It describes the rulers and authorities of this world who strut over the earth and conspire against God and try to thwart God - and then it says, 'He who sits in heaven laughs!' You see, the posturing of the rulers and the powerful make God laugh and that is the divine basis for Charlie Hebdo and other scurrilous publications. The powerful can be laughed because they have power enough to take care of themselves. But with the weak it's different. A degree of sensitivity is necessary there.

Well, you say, maybe that's true. But why then should we not mock Muhammad and Islam? They're not exactly weak and powerless, indeed they are exceedingly and increasingly powerful! Well, I would suggest that is simplistic. Yes, it is true that Islam is on the rise, but in the context of the broader sweep of history we would have to acknowledge that in recent centuries the West has been the imperial power in the world, colonising and subjugating and imposing itself and reaping the rewards. And now for those associated with that imperialistic power to be mocking and ridiculing and trampling on the sensitivities of those it has dominated – well, you can understand the anger and the resentment. And it's all very well for enlightened, sophisticated atheists to mock and ridicule unenlightened, ignorant Muslim believers but maybe that is precisely where some restraint and respect should be shown. So yes, of course we defend the right to free speech. And yes, satire and lampooning are vital to a healthy society. And yes, no-one has the right not to be insulted. But as Paul says a couple chapters further on in this letter: 'all things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial'. What we have the right to do and how we ought to treat people are two very different matters. Or, in other words, freedom needs to be tempered by love. Freedom is not absolute, there are constraints.

So a dispute about ancient, arcane practices that belong to another world long gone turns out to raise questions about how we live today and what kind of a world we want to live in. We want to live in a society where freedom of speech is protected. We want to live in a society where truth speaks to power. We want to live in a society where we can laugh at the powerful and to be offensive is not a crime. But we also want to live in a society that is gracious and seasoned with love and respect, especially for minorities and those who in one way or another are weaker.

And here today at this table we gather round this food, hosted as we are by our Lord, the one and only true Lord who rules over all and before whom every other lord and power must bow. And this bread and wine speak here of liberation, of our freedom under the One sovereign God. And they tell us too that we are loved, more than we know, and we are summoned to love one another. And in that combination of freedom and love we work out our salvation and we point the way to a peaceful and free society. Amen.

O holy and loving God,  
forever sovereign, forever Lord, forever free,  
we worship you, we praise you that  
out of love you have created the world,  
out of love you created human beings  
bearing your image -  
and out of love you have limited yourself,  
binding yourself to the world you love,  
tying yourself to your beloved creatures.  
And you have created us to be free,

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captive to nothing and to no-one.  
Forgive us, O God,  
that we misuse our freedom;  
forgive us that in grasping for freedom  
we neglect love – and so we end up in captivity.  
O God we acknowledge that we abuse our freedom  
and betray love and we acknowledge and confess our sin.  
Have mercy upon us we pray.  
Have mercy upon us and forgive us  
and assure us of your grace.  
Set us free, O God, we pray,  
free to love and to serve you and others.  
We pray in the name of Jesus and in his words  
We join together, saying...

O holy and loving God,  
we pray today for the powerful –  
for those who have influence in shaping  
the world, and a seat at the table where  
decisions are made –  
that they may shape our world for the good of all.  
But we remember too those poorer countries where  
resources are scarce and whose economies are

affected by the policies and decisions of others...

This morning we pray especially for Malawi where we support the Mission Hospital in Mulanji, a country that has suffered severe flooding in recent days. O God we pray for those most affected by the severe rains; for those who have lost loved ones and livelihoods, and we pray for the government that you would equip them with wisdom and integrity...

And we pray for the Mulanji Mission Hospital, for nurses and doctors and teachers and administrators, and for those who use its facilities. O God, may it be a beacon of hope.

And we pray today too for peace and reconciliation between different faiths, that we may show respect and demonstrate unity even in deep disagreement. And we pray against those extremists who are so ruthless in their murder and destruction – and we remember today hostages being held by Islamic State, praying for their safety and release.

And we pray for this Church, especially as our elders have been reflecting and planning this weekend. We pray for our minister and our Consistory and for all who attend here, remembering especially those who are sick or infirm, and those facing or recovering from surgery. Bless we pray the life and witness of this Church And renew and refresh us with your Spirit.

O God hear our prayers today for a more equal  
And a more peaceful world,  
For we pray in the name of the one true God  
And the Lord who rules over all,

Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.