

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today I would like to reflect on Paul's teaching in the passage for today from his letter to the church in Corinth. The Greek city of Corinth has had a long and varied history, marked by strong leaders, war and violence, earthquake and eventual destruction. The city had a reputation for extreme living, for excesses and a wealth of material temptations. Horace, the famous Roman poet is quoted as saying: "*non licet omnibus adire Corinthum*," which translates as "Not everyone is able to go to Corinth." This saying comes from the reputation for expensive living that prevailed in the city. The city was renowned for the temple prostitutes of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who served the wealthy merchants and the powerful officials living in or travelling in and out of this port city. In 146 BCE the Roman Lucius Mummius marched on Corinth, which was a partner in the Achaean League, razed the city, killed the men, and sold the women and children into slavery. The city was completely rebuilt under Roman oversight. A mixed population of Greeks, Romans and Jews lived there, creating a diverse cultural environment.

In the early 50s of the first century CE the apostle Paul visited the city. He remained there eighteen months (Acts 18.1-18). As many as four letters were written to the church by Paul in response to issues in the vibrant new Christian community. Only two of these letters are preserved in the biblical canon.

Today's passage deals specifically with the matter of food sacrificed to idols. In a city of many cultures pagan practices prevailed in the first century. Pagan religious ritual included regular sacrifice of animals in temples to the deities whom the people believed visited them. In Corinth, the priests of the massive temple of Aphrodite received animal sacrifices every day which were offered to the deity in the anticipation of her patronage and guarding of the city. The temple staff ate the meat, but offerings usually exceeded the consumption of the temple staff and the surplus was taken to the market where local butchers sold it on to regular customers. This of course created issues for both Jews and Christians, neither of whom were traditionally allowed to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Eating such meat broke the commandment against idol worship.

For Jewish Christians, the first converts to the way of Jesus, not eating idol meat was easy because they were used to purchasing only from Jewish butchers. As we know from the record of Paul's preaching and mission, non-Jewish people were soon numbered among the followers of Jesus. These people would not be present in the Jewish quarter of Corinth but would have shopped in the common markets of the city. The problem of these new Christians eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols was clearly a cause of division and conflict within the Corinthian church. Paul must break with Jewish tradition in defending the eating of sacrificial meat. He admits that one is not worse or better off by eating such meat or abstaining from it. This is a radical move for Paul, a move which potentially could estrange the Jewish Christians present in the church. When one has lived their life thinking that a food is polluted then one is unlikely to ever eat it, even after assurance that such a food is clean. Jewish Christians still lived among Jews, even within their own family networks.

As we know from scripture however, Paul was not afraid to speak boldly and innovatively, to risk causing offence and conflict. Neither does he speak in ways that are always easy to understand. It is necessary to think deeply about Paul's teaching, to let his message rest in us and connect with our time and cultural context. Paul's letters require faith in the Lord Jesus and the commitment to study to discern meaning.

His argument is based on the sure knowledge that there is only one God, whom he relates as the Father in heaven and the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. His theology drops just short of expressing the Holy Trinity here, although the Holy Spirit is presumed. Anything else that claims to be God must be false. The city was full of gods and lords that the pagans claimed as part of their religions. However, what someone who doesn't believe in the God of Jesus Christ says is a god can never be the true God. Therefore, food that is sacrificed to idols is not polluted unless one ascribes godlike status to the idol. It is a simple matter to Paul. If he eats sacrificial meat it is just ordinary meat because he does not believe in any other God except the Father and Jesus Christ, the

Lord. With this perspective Paul disempowers the idols and may live in the common areas of the city and shop in the common markets.

Paul acknowledges however, that not all Christians in Corinth made such an easy distinction. The pagan ways persisted among church members. Paul refers to these as people whose consciences are weak. These are the ones who think they have knowledge, but who lack the driving love that liberates them to know only God and Jesus Christ. These people are learning the faith. It is because of these that Paul encourages others not to eat the sacrificial meat. If your personal practices cause others who are not yet mature in faith to falter, then the sin is against Christ himself, for these are the people for whom he died. The message remains clear today. We do not have to decide between meat sacrificed to idols and meat that has not been subject to offering. There are many idols however, many things that can tempt a person who is not strong in faith, who is still learning the way, to fall into sin.

Today many things compete with God for our exclusive attention. Perhaps it is work – how many people in our society are addicted to working to the extent that it causes families to fracture and lives to be broken? Perhaps it is substance – alcohol, food, medications. It might be binge TV, sporting teams, pornography, gambling. The list is endless and whilst it might not affect you personally, you who are strong in faith who can easily overlook the excesses of our rich society, it might well affect your fellow human being who is longing to break a habit and find meaning and true life. Christians therefore all have a responsibility to be known as Christians, to practice behaviours known to them as Christ-like wherever they go and in whose ever company they keep. In so doing others may see and be encouraged. May we all be inspired by Paul's message to keep the faith and express our faith with courage and delight.