

The Corinthian Grain

Sunday 28 February 2010 – Rev Lance Thomas

1 Corinthians 10:23 – 1:11

In the years my Mum and Dad lived in Raglan whenever we visited them at about four thirty in the afternoon Dad and I would go down to the bowling club which was just about across the road. Dad played bowls occasionally. Maybe twice a month, but he went down to the bowling club at four thirty nearly every night. Because, between four thirty and seven nearly every night the club would be open and a regular group would gather to socialise and have a few beers together.

One of the regulars was a stalwart of the Catholic church, my Mum and Dad went to the Anglican church, but apart from that I don't think any of the group were Christians, or church goers. They all knew I was a minister, often because I would be in conversation about rugby or building or fishing or laughing away about something, and Dad would say, 'you wouldn't guess he was a minister would you.' Dad had a sort of confused pride in my chosen path. The thing I remember about this mainly likeable bunch was the impact my presence played. They would often apologise for their language, I don't think I ever reacted negatively to anyone's choice of words. There was nothing I hadn't heard before. Often I felt they liked me. I would have a beer with them, although at my measured pace, and some would share important stuff, for them, with me. I got the impression some lifted their game in some areas for my sake. I know that group was sometimes characterised by drinking to excess by some, silly arguments and disagreements over trivial things, some people not talking to each other, school boy level jokes and a pretty low common denominator of conversation, but not usually in front of me. Dad would say to Mum, 'they were well behaved tonight, Lance was there. So and so didn't do his usual thing.'

I hear other similar stories from members of our congregation as their family, work and recreational lives take them into a culture quite different from the church culture I live in most of the time. Some writers call this a process of infiltration. The relationship between the Christian culture and the world into which we are called to live the reconciling life has always been a difficult and challenging relationship.

The strange, to us, discussion in chapters 8-10 of Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, about food sacrificed to idols, is about this difficult, challenging and incredibly important relationship. This issue was so important that I don't think it is an overstatement to say it determined the future of the Christian Church. Did the Gospel belong to the Church or the world?

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. There were two kinds of sacrifice, private and public. In private sacrifice, the animal was divided into three parts. A token was burned on the altar, the priests received their rightful portion and the worshipper themselves received the rest of the meat. If it was a beast for example, it was a good chunk of meat. With that meat the worshipper would give a banquet. You couldn't just stick it in the freezer. It had to be consumed then and there. Sometimes the feast was in the house of the host, sometimes even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice had been made. The problem that confronted the Christian was, 'could he or she take part in such a feast at all?'

Could they take meat upon their lips that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god? If they couldn't they were cutting themselves off almost entirely from all social occasions. In public sacrifice, after the required symbolic amount had been burned and after the priests had received their share, the rest of the meat was given to the magistrates and others. What they did not use they sold to the shops and the markets. Therefore even when meat was bought in the shops it might well have already been offered to some idol and to some heathen god.

Complicating things even more was the very common belief in demons and evil spirits that were lurking everywhere trying to get inside a person to injure the body or unhinge their mind. The belief was that these spirits settled on food, and got inside people as they consumed the food. The way to avoid this happening was to dedicate the food to a good god. It was incredibly difficult to avoid meat that was not in some way connected with a heathen god. Could the Christian eat it?

In the large cities like Corinth where control over food source was almost impossible this was a problem that affected everyday life. It needed to be settled one way or another.

Taking part in idol feasts, yes or no? Eating meat bought in shops with questionable origins, yes or no?

Within the Christian church in Corinth, there were two strongly opposing responses. The first was the group called the rigorists, strongly influenced by Christian practice coming out of Jerusalem under the influence of the Apostle Peter. This group also focused on the deep connection to the Jewish faith. Their answer was a simple ban on eating any food that had been offered to idols. They even went further to encouraging non-Jewish converts to adhere to the strict Kosher laws of the Jewish faith.

Paul does not take on this group. It's almost a dismissal by silence. I said the debate determined the future of the Church. If the rigorists had determined the direction of the Christian Church it would have remained an extension of the Jewish faith. A small group not accepted by Judaism, but an offshoot of it.

Paul is sometimes criticised for being conservative. He was in fact a clear thinking far sighted radical. It was a Spirit-inspired Paul who grasped the visionary truth, that in Jesus Christ, God was doing a new thing, for the world. Jew and Gentile (non Jew), slave and free, male and female etc ...

There was a second group in Corinth which became recognised for their particular response, the Corinthian attitude, or the Corinthian grain, as it has been called. The emphasis was freedom in Christ. Idols were nothing – just bits of wood or stone, carved by human hands. The heathen gods, also nothing, there is absolute freedom in Christ. This group were sometimes called the libertines. So the legalists said 'do what the law says', the libertines response is 'we know better – be free'.

The Corinthian grain focused on the rights of the individual to eat whatever they liked. In fact they were very big on their personal rights. Their personal freedoms. In many ways they resemble our Post Modern world. Post Modernists are against being told what to do, what to think, opposed to dogmatic statements about what is true and what is not. I will decide truth for myself and don't you try and force your truth on me.

Paul's heart was with this group. Of course idols are just bits of wood, or stone. They have no life or power. Meat is meat, in Christ enjoy it. You know that is true, he says, I know that's true, but there is something more important than truth.

'Everything is permissible – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible – but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, this has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience sake – the other man's conscience I mean, not yours.'

A little further on, 'Do not cause anyone to stumble whether Jews or Greeks or the Church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many ...'

Prior to this Paul has talked a lot about what he is entitled to. He talks about his rights as an Apostle - he refers to James and Peter and other Apostles, who are supported in their needs by the Church, them and their wives and families. He talks about the rights of the preacher and pastor, 'the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.' But says Paul, 'I forgo these rights for the sake of others.'

So while Paul recognises freedom in Christ, he suggests that the greatest freedom is the choice not to exercise that freedom for the sake of others. Love for others is a higher principle than being right.

So in this case, eat whatever, so long as your doing so doesn't confuse or compromise your brother. You know there is nothing in this meat business, but if your example causes a brother to go against his conscience, then don't do it, because going against conscience is a slippery path downwards and concern for your brother is the most important thing.

When I was a Youth group leader I gave up drinking any alcohol, even at the club with my Dad, because one of key messages I wanted to get across to our young people was that good company is intoxicating. You don't need alcohol to have fun, relax, enjoy each others company,

be accepted – good company is ‘intoxicating’. The focus in that environment was love for the youngsters in our group.

Generally speaking we don’t have a problem with meat that has been offered to idols, but we do have our own examples of living in and relating to a culture that has different values to our Christian culture.

One example of this is alcohol. Our Kiwi culture is lubricated by alcohol and it is at the centre of much of the sadness and abuse in our society. What should our Christian response to this reality be? As we answer that for ourselves the first thing we need to understand is that we do answer it for ourselves. Freedom in Christ, that’s what the Corinthian Grain emphasises. But says Paul, that freedom is also the freedom to exercise your freedom to put the needs of others first.

The Christian gospel doesn’t place a ban on most things or activities, it’s actually harder than that. It gives freedom and the invitation to subject that freedom to Christ. The Church should be different to the world in which we live, it is called to be a counter culture. I think the attitude to lots of things in the Church, should be different to the attitudes of the world, including our attitude to alcohol.

Despite the propaganda to the contrary, Christians know how to have fun, the intoxicating enjoyable time spent in good company. We have something to offer, something to offer a world that mostly seems to need a little or a lot of mind altering stimulation to enjoy what should be theirs by right.

On the other hand the gospel is for the world, not to be closeted in the Church. The meat given to idols in our world may be things like alcohol or music, movies, dancing or sport, or fashion, television, food ...

We are called to engage with that world and in Christ fearlessly engage with an agenda that is dictated by love for the people of that world, rather than our freedom to be different.