

**1 Corinthians 8:1-13****Responsible freedom**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been just over a year since the first confirmed Covid-19 case in Australia. And along with the emergency health measures of lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings, we've had an ongoing public conversation regarding rights and freedoms. One of the interesting things I've noticed is how many Christians started talking about their right to do something when the scriptures don't use this sort of language at all.

What we do get is passages like today's epistle reading where St Paul warns about using your Christian freedom to the detriment of others. The circumstances we find ourselves in are not exactly parallel to the issue in Corinth, but we can learn from it regardless. The main thrust of St Paul's message is found in verse nine: "But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble." (1 Corinthians 8:9, NLT)

The word 'freedom' here is sometimes translated as 'liberty', but it's used in other passages to mean 'authority'. It's very much referring to having the right to act in a particular way. So, the message we take today is that we may well have freedom in Christ, but it must be used responsibly, and with care for the sake of the vulnerable.

For St Paul's original audience, the message was about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. For the community in Corinth, this was something worth worrying about. Most meat available in the markets was the remnants of sacrifices made in the temples. And so, the question for the church in Corinth was whether Christians should eat this meat. Corinth was known in the first century as a very multicultural town, inviting all sorts of pagan worship practices. It would have been difficult for Christians there to live in a manner completely separate from the world around them. And so, what we see from St Paul, is that he tries to establish a behaviour that takes into account both the fact that the Christians live in the world but are also somewhat separate from it.

Paul's answer that believers technically have the right to eat the meat sacrificed to idols may have come as a surprise, but his argument is sound. The idols are a non-reality. There is no God but the one true God. So, the meat has been sacrificed to nothing, and so that means nothing and does nothing. For those who knew that idols were nothing, St Paul stated the obvious: eating food, even food sacrificed to idols, does not make believers unacceptable to God.

It does not matter if that meat was offered as a sacrifice to a false god in a pagan temple. Eating it will not hurt you. There's no actual power in it to do damage to you or to your faithfulness to God. But that is not the only consideration.

St Paul shifts the focus from what I'm allowed to do, to how my actions impact the lives of others, and how that might give us reason to restrict our own behaviour. His concern is that Christian freedom should never be flaunted or wielded carelessly. Believers at Corinth needed to be mindful that some in their fellowship, being so used to idolatry and having as yet a weak conscience, could be harmed by seeing Christians eat the food associated with idols. And in language reminiscent of Jesus in Matthew 18, St Paul says the strong are not to be a stumbling block to the weak.

The meat sacrificed to idols might be fine to eat, but what impact might it have on a new convert? It might look like there's no distinction between things offered to idols and things offered to God, and hence no distinction between the pagan gods and the one true God. If that's the case, then you might as well continue worshipping the same gods that your family has always worshipped instead of jumping ship to join the Christians. St Paul does acknowledge that objectively speaking, those who opposed the eating of meat offered to idols were wrong. And yet people stand at different points in their understanding and in the strength of their relationship to God. So, for their sake, he basically says to act as they are right.

He takes this approach, not out of condescension or self-righteousness, but out of the recognition that on a scale of one to a hundred, when we compare our understanding and love to the understanding and love of God, we all stand at maybe a one or two, or, on our best days, perhaps a five. Nowhere near the full measure of the love and knowledge of the God of all creation.

At the start of the chapter, St Paul actually places knowledge and love as two opposing terms. He's not speaking about knowledge in general, but the type of arrogant knowledge that puffs up with pride. Contrast that with the self-giving and self-sacrificing love demonstrated by Christ. This love builds up and edifies the community and not the self. And so, in the situation at Corinth, the knowledge about the reality of food sacrificed to idols gives way to the actions that demonstrate love for the community of believers.

For St Paul, the bigger threat to this still young Christian community is any attitude of "I'm right. You're wrong. And you're silly for thinking and acting the way you do." If that's how you approach an issue, then that is a bigger problem than the issue itself. Over the years, this teaching from St Paul has been summarised as, "If you have to choose between being loving and being right, be loving."

The gospel has set us free, but not so that we can cause others to stay bound. If we ever think we have a right to do something, that must be checked against how it impacts our fellow believers. This is not always easy. We don't always properly see what's going on in any given situation. And sometimes we just have to trust in God's grace and mercy. We may fall, or cause others to fall, and the only answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that all our failures, all our sin, has been crucified with Christ.

We are free in Christ. Free to live in a world that doesn't understand true freedom. Free to love and serve our neighbour in need. Free for all eternity because of what Christ has done for us. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.