

Epiphany 4
31/1/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

Freedom bound for love

In a sentence

Freedom is always properly freedom to love and to lift each other

If there is one question which is taxing the best minds of the church in this day and age, it is *not* the question about whether we ought to be eating meat which has been offered idols. The impact of the gospel has been such that we have pretty much relegated such matters to a forgotten past.

Yet, as foreign to us as those old arguments might be, there is a very close relationship between how Paul approaches the dispute and how we ourselves might deal with problems of difference in our midst as a faith community, as a denomination, or in our wider society. For Paul is interested in the nature of the freedom we have in the gospel, and the consequences of this nature for our exercise of that freedom.

The Corinthians understood themselves to be a people freed by the gospel. Yet their understanding of this freedom was badly skewed, and this was the reason for much of what Paul writes about throughout the letter. As he often does in this letter, this morning's reading has Paul apparently quoting back to the Corinthians a saying of their own: 'all of us have knowledge'. It's a seemingly innocuous statement, but its purpose here is to justify the practice of eating meat offered to idols. 'All of us has knowledge' implies, 'We know that the idols of heathen worship are nothing, so we may safely eat meat sold from the temples without compromising our belief in Christ; faith in Christ has revealed to us which among the gods matter, and which do not.'

Perhaps surprisingly, Paul has no problem with this. He sees that the gospel does give such freedom. But at the same time he knows that not all Christians are equally free to enjoy the fruits of what they now know. Some Christians – quite probably those who were once regular participants in the temple cults – are unable to get out of their heads the thought that, by continuing to eat sacrificial meat, they are relapsing back into their previous beliefs.

Paul's response to this situation, on behalf of these so-called 'weak' believers, opens up a new dimension on the character of the knowledge and freedom Christians have in the gospel. While there is no 'in principle' gospel-objection to taking advantage of the cult to get your meat, there is a local social or communal one. The knowledge and the freedom we have in the gospel is never a knowledge and freedom for us as individuals but for us as we stand together before God in Christ. Paul's challenge to the Corinthians shifts our attention from the freedom which comes from knowing about God or the world to the freedom which arises from, and gives rise to, love.

If all we know is that we are free to do this or that thing, that is not enough, not the 'necessary knowledge'. To 'know' is merely to be expanded – 'puffed up' Paul calls it. The richer possibility is to know, and yet to *put aside* knowledge and the freedom it might bring in order that another might not fall. This Paul calls love – that which

knows and yet does not allow what it knows to become a distraction for one who knows less. In more tangible terms: love knows that meat offered to idols is only meat. But love is prepared to treat the meat as contaminated by the cult in order not to destabilise the faith of some so-called 'weaker' believer who can't get it out of her head that it's tainted by the idol. Love abandons its freedoms. Love enslaves itself to the weaker one in order that *together* we might be strong. 'Therefore', Paul declares, 'if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall'.

As we've already observed, whether we ought to eat meat sacrificed to idols is not a question which taxes our minds much these days. But Paul's principle applies far beyond that problem. Whether in the church or out of it, the call is to an exercise of freedom which is the freedom to *deny* ourselves some of our liberties in the gospel, in order that the humanity of others might be enriched. In the church and in the wider world the variety of possible accommodations of the weaknesses of others is as great as the number of human relationships. Still the call is the same: 'take care that your liberties do not become somehow a stumbling block to the weak'.

Of course, there are a thousand objections and qualifications which come to mind whenever a preacher generalizes in this way about how we ought to treat each other – whether the preacher is St Paul, or the one to whom you are subject. Fundamentally, we object to how easily an ethical system like this can be manipulated and abused by the hysterical or the tyrannical. God is not unaware of these problems, and even a preacher might sense that it's dangerous ground. But that doesn't make the call to deny ourselves go away. Hear the call, and seek to live it in your lives, with all the ambiguities which come with any commandment.

For the problem with commandments is not that they might be abused in their application, but that it is impossible to be confident that we've actually met them. Sooner or later we may say a loud 'No' to the puritanical ascetic or to the loose libertine; but we will *never* know just when enough is enough.

Which is also to say, we never really know when God does the same for us, because it is God's dealings with us which is the basis of the ethic Paul describes here. Though God in Christ could have chosen freedom from the world, he joined himself to a world which neither particularly looked for him nor welcomed him. Paul speaks elsewhere of Christ as the one who had no sin, and yet *became* sin that we might become righteousness. That is, in his baptism into the highs and lows of human life, Jesus put aside his freedoms in order to be '*for us*'. He does not merely become human but allows himself to be thoroughly marked by human brokenness, to the point of becoming that brokenness himself, on the cross... It is only thus that brokenness itself is broken, in that God took it into himself, allowing himself to become something new – the *crucified* God, truly God even to those who cry out, 'Our God, our God, why have you abandoned us?' Our lives together are godly to the extent that they reflect, not God's 'moral' perfection, but that *perfecting* liberty of God which is not afraid to be limited and made a little dirty, if perchance it might mean that some will be healed.

Knowledge of our freedoms merely puffs us up in our own little worlds, but loving towards the freedom of others builds us all up.

By the liberating power of the Spirit, may God's people ever more closely reflect in themselves the freedom of his Son to lay down our lives for others, and to take them up anew by his power!
