

Matins, 24th July 2022

Genesis 42: 1-25, 1 Corinthians 10:1-24

Mother Emma

It's perhaps important to remind ourselves of the context of the otherwise somewhat confusing and mysterious passage we have just heard from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The matter in hand is in some ways so very alien and incomprehensible to us in a modern setting that it is hard to imagine what relevance it could possibly have for us today. Yet, as so often with the words of Scripture, as we examine them more closely, our passage might appear more and more to echo themes and situations, dilemmas and moral choices which we, our leaders, and the nations of the world face day by day in the twenty-first century.

The elders of the Corinthian Church, a congregation established by Paul over a visit of several months, have written to him in Ephesus to seek help and advice with a variety of questions about their faith and its liturgical and practical outworking. One of the topics they raise with him, is the question of idolatry.

Corinth was a thriving Greek city in a key position for international trade; a place where traders of all nationalities and faiths encountered one another and interacted. The pagan religions of both Greek and Roman culture were strongly observed, alongside a Jewish community and now the new "People of the Way" – the Christians whom Paul had converted.

Temples and shrines were places of worship and sacrifice to pagan gods, and Paul expressly forbids his fledgling congregation from visiting them or eating there. However, some of the meat from the extraordinary number of animal sacrifices sometimes found themselves onto stalls in the marketplace, and the Corinthians want to know if it is OK to eat this meat – after all, they neither believe in nor sacrifice to the pagan gods, so this is, at the end of the day, just meat from prime animals. They claim that they have sufficient understanding and knowledge not to be confused or tempted into honouring the gods to whom these animals had been sacrificed, so frankly, what does it matter?

While Paul sees their point, he is also conscious of those who are still at a very early stage of their Christian conversion, or those whose faith could be easily shaken. He wants his church to maintain the clarity of the distinction between their Way and the way of those who worship pagan gods, and he is concerned that any blurring of the boundaries could result in the loss of some who were exploring the ideas of Christianity. For this reason, he encourages them NOT to eat the sacrificed meat, not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others who might observe them. He sums up his arguments in the strong exhortation:

"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.

The word "edify" is translated in modern Bibles as "to build up", and for Paul the key question is not whether something is legal according to the letter of the law, but whether it results in the building up of the faith and wellbeing of others.

Animal sacrifice is almost certainly – indeed hopefully – no longer a moral question for most of us, but the idea that we might give our Christian brothers and sisters the impression by our behaviour or our lack of thought, that we set the idols of our time – power, wealth, celebrity – above the teachings of our faith probably should be.

I have been wrestling this week with how to address this passage without the mention of any of the recent political scandals, of which we may all feel we have heard too much, but finally gave up the struggle after a commentary I read described the Corinthians' dilemma as "wanting to join the party", which I felt might be a message!

Some might say that like the eating of sacrificed meat, this is a question of optics – whether or not we stray outside what is strictly legal, we can still give the impression to others that we do not care about the way we are seen, or the extent to which we empathise with them in their struggles.

Other examples of ways in which this passage might relate to modern society could perhaps be found in the banking crises in which people followed the minutiae of the law, without considering whether their actions were more broadly moral or working for the greater good and wealth of many.

It is of course legal to waste water or to invest in fossil fuels, but we might still ask ourselves before we do so, whether we are building up the lives of our brothers and sisters across the world, or risking the destruction of their homes and livelihoods.

Christ teaches us that we are all one in the Body of Christ – we share responsibility, not just for one another's growth in faith, but for their human flourishing. The law exists to prevent active wrongdoing, but the Spirit of God encourages us to go way beyond simply avoiding what is illegal, and seek to serve and build up all those around us.

Elsewhere, St Paul writes,

“The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

Christian love is the opposite of self-orientation – we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves and to do everything in our power to care for and inspire them.

As our story of the Patriarchs in Genesis almost draws to a close, we are reminded of the brothers' action in selling Joseph to the slave traders, the pain caused to his father as a result, and we see their own realization of what they had done in their desire to be rid of their father's favourite.

“Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen.”

We might ask ourselves today whom our actions affect, whether they are close to home or out of sight and out of mind. Are we committed to the building up of God's people, and how far can we respond to Paul's cry,

“Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.”?