

Living with differences

Extracts from a sermon preached by Jim Mein on 1 February 2015

I don't remember preaching directly on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, though I'm sure I must have done sometime. Not an easy passage but of real significance in our modern world. Let me remind you.

It was about eating food offered to idols. This was a big deal. The social life of Corinth revolved round celebrations – births, marriages, deaths, special annual celebrations and so on. All of these would take place in centres dedicated to one of a variety of gods of whom there were very many. Almost all social engagements would recognise in some way the family or guild 'god' even if many of those present would recognise a different god if the meeting was in their own house or meeting place.

The Jews had, and many still have, clear views on this. They would never eat food that was not kosher and certainly not where anything equivalent to our saying grace might be inferred. In the Acts of the Apostles, James in Jerusalem at a meeting with Paul in Chapter 15 is very clear: "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God but we should write to them to abstain only from things that have been sacrificed to idols and from blood, and from what is strangled, and from fornication. If you keep yourself from these you will do well. Farewell." So Paul got most of what he came for (no circumcision or other laws), but we may think it odd that food connected to idols precedes fornication on this short list of exceptions. When Christians began to be persecuted, often the way they were discovered was that they refused to eat such meat – this was what separated them most clearly from the society around them.

But let's look at Paul in today's passage. I don't think at this stage it was an issue about persecution – Christians were not yet a significant enough group to be persecuted. But it was a serious challenge to the unity of the emerging Church, and it must have made making converts very difficult if they had to give up so many social engagements and contacts. However, Paul is not concerned with the practicalities. He makes the fundamental theological point that as no other gods exist, the idols do not represent anything real and therefore anything to do with them has no relevance – food is not changed when it has been linked to things that have no meaning. It is just as it was before, and therefore no harm can come from eating it.

However, he recognises that some people, and probably the majority, have been brought up with certain beliefs and they cannot just throw them off. If they see other Christians eating such food in such company they will either be deeply shocked and offended and split the Church. Or they will go along with those who eat, while still feeling deep in their hearts that this is wrong and their faith will be compromised.

So, says Paul, though eating such food cannot in fact harm you, we must care for those who have different views. It is not good to offend them or make faith more difficult for them.

I have not done justice to the complexity of Paul's argument, but let me turn to today. I believe, and often preach, that we must discuss differences, that the different cultures across the world need to engage with one another, to try and understand one another.

Indeed this is the core purpose of the meetings in Lent that I've set up. I really hope that as many of you as possible will find the time, energy and courage to come out on Wednesday evenings and share a diversity of views on a variety of different topics. [Ed: Details in the next column]

I know that living with differences is not easy – and I don't always do it – but I do believe we need to open gates in the walls that divide us.

I don't think it would have created a healthier society if the early Christians had consistently refused to eat with other communities. I don't think it makes for a healthier society when the Muslim community or any other nationality or faith group keeps itself to itself. It's difficult, and I fail in it, but we need people to cross all these boundaries – not to convert or attempt to make everyone the same. And not to suggest that it does not matter whether you belong to this or that faith or have this or that view. My faith is important to me, my view that gay couples should be treated in the same way as heterosexual couples is important to me, but I know others have different beliefs and there is a bit of me that recognises that they may have some valid, important views.

Our world seems to be full of groups who believe they have a right to impose their views on others. Most obvious and most dangerous are the terrorist groups, but we are all tempted sometimes to demonise others. We make fun of the beliefs of others and defend it with our right to 'free speech'. Of course there are views that we should oppose with all our strength, but it is almost always worth getting to know a bit more about them first. I'm glad Paul did not totally ban our eating together with others and I'm grateful to those who cross boundaries today and try to interpret the views of others to us.

Becoming part of the answer

A series on **Wednesdays** at 7.30pm in Holy Trinity Church Hall.

25 February: Inter-faith relations

Frank Bowness from the Fife Inter-faith group will introduce some of things happening in our area and invite discussion about how we maintain our own Christian integrity while giving due attention to other faiths.

4 March: Palestine and Israel

Nancy Adams, a regular visitor to the Holy Land will introduce her experiences of listening to the many different voices of this troubled region.

11 March: Same-sex relationships

Lis Burke from Perth attended the Provincial conference about this and will introduce the discussion. [Her name was suggested by Bishop David]

18 March: Homelessness

Jeremy Balfour from Scottish Churches Housing Action is coming to help us think through the issues – who has responsibility? Government, voluntary bodies, individuals? And what do we say or do when we pass someone sitting on the pavement?

25 March: End of life issues

Gordon McLaren, who is the Public Health Consultant in Fife and on the Board of "Good life, good death, good grief", will lead our thinking. This is *not* a body which promotes assisted suicide, but rather asks how we care for those who are close to the end of life, particularly if they are suffering and have no desire to struggle on?