

29/01/2006

Dt 18: 15-20;
1 Cor. 8:1 -13;
Mk 1:21 -28

FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS

Sermon by Bruce Barber

The rapidly departing Christmas celebration, and the premature emergence of hot cross buns, remind us that it is scarcely possible for us to be shocked by the sheer novelty of the Gospel. The fact is that it is in our bloodstream, even in that of those either unmoved or openly hostile to it. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but it can readily serve to insulate from surprise.

By way of contrast, both the passages from the epistle and gospel before us this morning testify to the sense of shock to the established order occasioned by the coming of Christian faith.

To grasp the impact of that novelty, we need to rehearse once again something of their background.

First, the issue before the Corinthian congregation.

Situated where it was, Corinth was an important trading city, and a main stage on the great Roman trade route to the east, Ephesus being the next. It was a cosmopolitan city of over half a million inhabitants, whose licentiousness and superficial intellectualism were a byword in the ancient world. In it dwelt people of all races: bond and free, Greeks, Romans, Jews and Barbarians. All sorts of trades prospered, and many cults and religions had their devotees. Further, the Greek intellectual tradition had long gone to seed, so that nothing remained of the wisdom of which the Corinthians were so proud. Indeed, 'to Corinthianise' was a polite Greek expression for 'go to the devil'. Civil religion was primarily the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of lust. Showy, factious, litigious, licentious - sound like any city we know? - all the dominant characteristics of the pagans have to be dealt with by Paul, for they have all invaded the Christian church.

So to the Christian community in this great heathen city - 'the Church of God in Vanity fair' as someone has phrased it - Paul wrote this first letter a decade or so before the first Gospel of Mark was produced - a chronological ordering of first significance for us if we want to get behind the gospels to see the communities for which they were written.

Here this morning, the question referred to Paul was: Is it allowable for Christians to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols? This was no idle question. Most of the meat for general sale in the markets would in fact have come from the temple. A further difficulty was that family parties, banquets and celebrations of all kinds were normally held in the courts of pagan temples. Jewish law had made it quite clear that Jews should not have anything to do with meat from such sources, and in practice, as today, Jews had their own butchers' shops. The Council of Jerusalem - something like an early Synod - had asked also that Gentile converts should refrain from meat offered to idols. But those who had referred the question to Paul did not feel that everything was so easily settled as that ruling would imply, even supposing that the rank and file knew of

it.

The argument of this 'enlightened' group was fundamentally sound, and was acceptable to Paul. It actually underlined an essential element of his own teaching as he explains: 'we know', he says, 'that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one. Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as in fact there are many gods and many lords - yet there is for us one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'.

That is to say, nothing that anyone does to a piece of meat affects it. You can eat it before, during or after the sacrifice: it is still the same piece of meat. For the fact is that it is from fears and superstitions of precisely this sort that the Christian has been set free.

But to this unimpeachable logic more needed to be said. There are other factors to be taken into account, says Paul. Not everyone in the community knows this freedom. Because they have become so accustomed to idols, they still eat of this food as that offered to an idol. The sense of the reality of that which they have now come to know to be false will still be with them. If they touch food offered to idols, they will have a sense of guilt. The danger for the liberated one - who indeed understands that Jesus means freedom - is that the eating of such meat will only bewilder those for whom to do this would be a real compromise with their Christian faith. More to the point, the one to whom this freedom to eat would be a stumbling block is one for whom Christ died. Further, says Paul, to eat in the presence of such a one is in effect to do it to Christ himself, and the end would be a communal betrayal of true freedom.

This sort of issue we find in Corinth is not one that we can readily find an analogy for in the utterly secular, non-religious culture in which we live. Loose talk about the propensity we all have to make 'idols' of things in the world, or of human projects, is a far cry from that which Corinth represents. At most such temptations will be of essentially worldly things, not divinities as they were in pagan times. For us the much larger adversary to be overcome is nihilism, but that's another story.

The main point we are to receive from Corinth remains, however: that the test of any Christian action is whether or not it 'edifies', that is to say, whether it serves to build up the body into a greater love for God and each other. Granted that in every situation this is the crux of the matter, each decision about what actually to do must be taken on its merits.

When we turn to the gospel passage today, we are confronted by an identical issue, all appearances perhaps to the contrary. This time, though, it has to do with Jesus himself. Here, in the synagogue, an utter scandal is occurring. It is hard for us to recover the shock which this scenario must have presented to the first hearers and readers of the gospel.

The offence is at least twofold. First, is the shocking revelation that in the place that teaches purity above all else, there evil is grotesquely present in the figure of a man with an unclean spirit. If infected pagan meat from a temple confronts Paul, here infected human flesh in a synagogue confronts Jesus. As far as the freedom of faith is concerned, there is no difference.

But the offence is doubled: it happens to be the Sabbath when Jesus does something legally and theologically abhorrent. He heals, or as the hearers intriguingly call it, enacts 'a new teaching'.

Perhaps that is a third shock - for us at least. Where teaching is commonly trivialised to be nothing more than the imparting of information - the teaching of history being 'the objective record of achievement' as we have been told this week by the Prime Minister - who would have thought that teaching - specifically teaching about God - about truth - would constitute healing? If to no one else, that says a lot to us who are trying to learn what it means to be ministers of the gospel - not least for our brothers and sisters whose work is in a theological college!

The point is clear - that in the figure of the man with an unclean spirit, concealed uncleanness resides in the very place and presence of those responsible for the proper ordering of society. And as if this is not offensive enough, it is precisely this unclean one, not the religious establishment, who is the first to recognise Jesus' true identity.

But even more, hear what this demon possessed calls Jesus. Not a prophet, not a teacher, not even the Messiah, which is the best that, later on, the leading insider Peter can manage. Rather, the demoniac calls Jesus that most exalted title of all: 'I know who you are the Holy One of God'. How is that for rubbing mud in the faces of the establishment?

And then, instead of destroying the one so afflicted as the demoniac and those present might have expected, this Holy One of God heals him.

But we haven't finished being shocked, for see this - that as the demon departs, the unclean spirit 'cries with a loud voice', screams actually. This is precisely the form of words that later this gospel uses to describe the last breath of Jesus himself. Jesus we are told 'uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last'. The truth is that there - on the cross - the demons of this world are being exorcised by the same scream - in the figure of the dead 'Holy One of God' who would not, did not, - could not? - heal himself.

In the Old Testament reading today, we are told: If you say in your heart 'How may we know the Word which the Lord has not spoken?' - the answer is given: when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him.

What a perfect foil this is for the gospel - both in Capernaum and Corinth. For where in both places the Word of God most gloriously came to pass - not just for the demon possessed man; not just for the Corinthian congregation - the promise is that it continues to wait to become a true word for all of us, even here in North Melbourne.

Jesus means freedom. That is the gospel.

The only question for us is: can we bear such a gift?