

March 7th 2004

In the reading from Corinthians we have heard read today we have the second question that the Corinthians had asked the Apostle Paul in the letter they had wrote to him. It would seem that the Corinthians had claimed in their letter to have knowledge of the true situation concerning meat which had been offered to idols; It was well known that the best place to buy a good roast or steak in Corinth was right next to the Idol temple, in these pagan temples, they did like the Jews in Old Testament days – they offered living animals as sacrifice. And like the Jews they, they reserved some of the meat for the benefit of priests and for sale to the public, so the best meat markets in Corinth were next to the idol temple. Everyone around town knew if you ate some of that meat, you were eating meat that had been offered to an idol. Did these rituals automatically taint the food? Could Christians buy it? Could Christians eat meat at the various festivals and celebrations? If a Christian eats meat offered to an idol is he not participating in some way in the worship of the idol?

A group within the church said ‘yes’. If you eat the sacrificed meat you are participating in the worship of the idol. When the pagans in the city see a known Christian sitting down in the public eating places right next to the temple and enjoying that steak that had been offered to the idol, they think that person is going along with the pagan ideas about that idol. As a consequence, the Christian is giving a false testimony; he is not clearly declaring that Christ has substituted for all idols everywhere. Furthermore, he is a stumbling block to the weak Christians who might very easily be led back into worship of idols by these actions.

Another group said, ‘no’ this is not true. There is nothing to an idol – it is just a piece of stone or wood. How can you worship something that does not exist? How can we deliver these people from their idolatrous ways if we act as though there is something to this? It is better that we simply proceed according to that knowledge of reality that God has brought to us in Christ. Let us enjoy our freedom and eat this meat without any question. It is perfectly good meat, and it would be wrong to not use it. Thus there was a division in the Church.

Notice how Paul handles this. He recognizes that there are two groups present.

There was a ‘Freedom Party’ that boasted in their knowledge. As it said in verse 1 -

“all of us possess knowledge”. And the Apostle Paul was simply repeating what the ‘Freedom Party’ was saying; in verse 4: “As to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists and there is no God but one.” That is what they were arguing to support this idea that everybody has knowledge. There are not any real idols, just pieces of wood or stone. They are just a symbol of men’s and women’s ideas and superstitions. Therefore there is no reason why we should set aside and eat the meat without any doubts or uneasiness.

Some of them were arguing the Christian position: “We know there is only one God, one true God, and we will worship Him.” When we are eating the meat sacrificed to idols we are not worshipping those pagan gods. Those gods do not even exist!

The Apostle Paul recognizes that knowledge is right! He says, “That is true. There is only one true God. - for us there is one God, the Father from whom all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Paul uses this acclamation as a hymn or creed the Corinthians would have recognized as an authoritative statement of the Christian faith. Printed editions of the Greek New Testament say: ‘ One God, the Father, from whom are all things - and we for Him, And one Lord, Jesus Christ, Through whom are all things and we through Him.

Paul does acknowledge that not everyone believes this, ‘as many mythological deities and lords of mystery cults were fervently worshiped and emperors were calling themselves divine and demanding sacrifice.’ Though Paul felt certain that spirits and demons did exist and that they were behind the idols and using them to seduce people from the worship of the true God.

Paul answered like this - as it went along the same lines of thought that the Roman world practiced at that time. In the Roman Empire the deities were gods, but Caesar was Lord. Caesar was a mere man, yet the Romans called him ‘Lord’. There were many struggles in the early Church over the question of whether Caesar was Lord or Jesus was Lord.

Paul is pointing out that the Father is the true God, not that He is all of God; As we know from other Biblical passages that God exists as three persons in one, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Paul explains that the Father represents the wholeness of God, and Jesus is the Lord - He who became man and came amongst us! Different from Caesar who was a Lord of the Roman world. Jesus Christ was the

one through whom all things and through whom we exist.

The argument - was simple - the knowledge these people had was right! But the Apostle Paul suggests there is a problem with knowledge.

Although we do not have this meat eating problem today there are some similar issues we face -

Shopping on Sunday's, playing sports on Sunday's, some television programmes, lottery tickets, smoking, drinking alcohol. We could list many issues that may divide Christian's today.

So how do we settle these different issues and points of view? When we hear of these issues being debated - they are usually always based on some 'new fact' or reality that has been discovered. Our Christian freedom is almost always defended by knowledge. And Paul says their knowledge and what they are arguing is correct. But he also tells them knowledge has certain problems with it and he teaches nothing ought to be judged solely from the point of view of knowledge - but he gently reminds them that knowledge apart from love 'puffs up' and is unedifying, distasteful, and can make you feel you are superior.

1.We only have to listen to arguments that are made today: - Some people may say "Look at those worldly Christians - they take a drink of wine." "I would not do that!" How can a Christian take a drink?

2.We also have those who may say "Oh those legalistic Bible Believers, why can't they loosen up and enjoy life. Jesus did not change water into grape juice at the Wedding in Cana. No it was wine. Good wine and lots of it!

And so the division is formed.

Yes Paul would say that if you as a mature Christian are sharing a meal with a younger Christian who is recovering alcoholic it could be insensitive and unloving for you to serve alcohol during a meal. Having a drink is not wrong in general . But having a drink in that situation could be highly inappropriate.

But when the two sides go at each other in the way I suggested a minute ago these kind of remarks are negative and are a failure to recognize the fact that people hold convictions with sincerity. Knowledge can create pride! It puffs us up - and makes us

feel superior to others.

Paul also says there is something else wrong with knowledge, it is always incomplete; in verse 2: 'Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.'

Knowledge always has to be exercised in the service of love, the common thread woven into our reading today.

Pastor Garth Wehrfritz- Hanson wrote:

A young boy who often spoke to his elderly neighbour once said to her; "I am a bit worried about going to church this week."

"I am sorry to hear that Billy, his neighbour said. What's the problem."

"Well it is getting a bit dangerous, Billy replied! Last week there was a Cannon in the pulpit, the choir murdered the anthem, and the organist drowned the choir."

This is a humorous story, it points out how young children come up with rather colourful and literal interpretations of the language of adults.

When I read this I felt it was a good interpretation of what was happening in the passage today from 1 Corinthians. Paul is very concerned about how mature Christians influence newer less mature Christians, when they choose to exercise their freedoms. As the young boy in the story picked up the violent destructive speech of adults, so too, less mature Christians can pick up incorrect and harmful messages from mature Christians.

There is a danger with knowledge it tends to make a man arrogant, feel superior and maybe look down on another unsympathetically who may not be as far advanced as he. Paul says knowledge alone is not enough - doctrine alone is not enough - 'we need love. Knowledge puffs up - love builds up. The way a Christian behaves should always be guided not by the thought of our own superior knowledge but by a sympathetic and considerate love for our fellowman. Love seeks union - oneness; This level of love is like an adhesive which can bind us together into deeper personal relationships.

Other religions and ideologies may imitate Christian beliefs and behaviour, but the one factor that is distinctive and unique about Christianity is love, the love of God made real in our hearts and our relationships by the Holy Spirit.

If a Christian has doubts or questions about right and wrong in relating to daily issues relating to living in the world - there are three practical things that may help..

..Will what I do help or hinder my relationship with our Lord Jesus?

.. Will my action help or hinder another's relationship with our Lord Jesus?

.. Above all else! Will it glorify God? 1 Corinthians 10: 31.. 'So, whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. When love is present in a person's life, it is one of the most powerful motivating forces known to man.

God is love John tells us in (1 John 4:8).

The essential nature of God is love! It is an all embracing love - since God desires we should be saved. As Paul writes in (1 Timothy 2). It is an unmerited love, In while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans) It is a sacrificial love - marked by God giving us His Son and even making Him to be sin for us As John wrote in his gospel(John 3:16). It is merciful love, since God longs to wash away our sins.Paul (Ephesians 2:4) It is a conquering love enabling us to overcome the trials and temptations that God in His wisdom allows us to experience for growth into full maturity Paul (Romans 8). It is an inseparable love - which nothing can break - neither depression, disease, demonic forces nor death itself Paul (Romans 8:38-39). It is a chastening love since this too is necessary for our highest good (Hebrews 12: 8). It is an everlasting love - which the scriptures remind us some 180 times.

Our Almighty God is the source of all love through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit within us - and we can have that love of God in us.

Such love can be seen among Christians when the Holy Spirit is working in our midst.

I feel God is calling us in a deeper way this Lent to prayer, and to study and meditate

on His Word. (Rev. 4) “If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with Me.”

A disciple of Jesus is someone who is trying to respond to the personal invitation of Jesus to be His follower and friend. Then we come to know God have a personal relationship with Jesus. And When we have that personal relationship with Him - if we ask He will fill us with His love.

In our world with the issues we are daily being confronted with, we need to be people of prayer asking for God’s love and wisdom to guide us. We need to act in love in what we do and say and not merely knowledge alone.

To thank God for the knowledge of truth in Jesus that sets us free. And ask our Lord for that love only He can give that can help us give consideration to another’s welfare, and not just our own.

And ask God that we here at St. Augustine’s may reflect Jesus’ love, as Jesus did Himself.