

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 31 JANUARY 2021

This service was prepared for the congregation at Marsden Road, an historic former Methodist church at Carlingford. It is one of the various congregations to which Lauris and I go, and like all the others, full of some wonderful, faithful and friendly people. You must forgive the Prayers of the People repeating a prayer of a fortnight ago. It isn't new to you, but it is for the folk at Marsden Road!

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

*Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

*He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

*The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

*He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.*

Holy and awesome is his name.

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.*

His praise endures forever.

Father, we confess that we continue to bring shame on ourselves,
and to cause you to weep, through our sinfulness.

Forgive us for the times when we knowingly make wrong choices,
and for the times when we do so without even thinking about it.

Forgive us for the times when we deliberately ignore things we should do,
and for the times when we walk past, not even noticing them.

Forgive us for the times when our words have been harmful or hurtful,
and for the times when our silence has been even worse.

Forgive us for the times when our universe has been centred on ourselves,
and for the times when our apparent service to others has been less than sincere.

Forgive us, Father, that we have not loved you with all our heart,
and that we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

For we confess that we are sinners, in need of your mercy and forgiveness.

We come to you, once again, to seek your grace.

In the name of Jesus, who came to save us from sin.

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

If we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
Hear then Christ's word of grace to us:
our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20
I Corinthians 8:1-13

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

Lord our God,
As we embark on this new year of 2021,
we pray for your blessing, your guidance and your help.
We continue to pray for the situation regarding Covid-19 around the world.
We give thanks that vaccines are becoming available,
but we are ashamed that the wealthy nations of the world
have sought to corner the market for their own citizens,
with too little regard for nations without such great resources.
Grant us both the wisdom and the decency to understand
that none of us is safe until all of us are safe.
And grant us the patience and understanding to realise
that the necessary roll-out of the vaccines will take many months;
that we must continue to be cautious both for our own sakes
and for the sake of others.
We pray for our own governments, Federal and State,
and for the men and women who lead them,
as they face a new year of uncertain challenges.
But we pray particularly for the government and the people of the United States,
who have been rocked by the violent unleashing
of so much that is hateful and destructive in their nation.
May the voices of decent people prevail over the strident cries,
and the outlandish lies, of those who deny reality,
and seek to wreak havoc and overturn order.
Bless the new administration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris,
and may they be able to unite their fractured nation behind them,
not only for the sake of all Americans,
but for the sake of the entire world.
Father, we pray that this might be a year
when there are more declarations of peace than declarations of war;
when the countless refugees all across the world
find succour, safety and a future of hope and promise.
We pray that this might be the year
when the world is galvanised into the urgent action
required to address our climate emergency;
when vested interests are exposed and stared down,
when people listen to science rather than to conspiracy theories,
and when all of us accept that we shall have to make sacrifices

if there is to be a future worth having for our children and grandchildren.
And finally, we pray for the prophets among us,
who tell us the hard truths;
and for the people who dream dreams of things that never were,
and ask why not.
May our hearts and minds be open to hearing their voices
and responding to their call.
Especially we pray for those who speak in your name,
pointing to the Lord Jesus,
and to the salvation which is in him and him alone.
May 2021 be the year when we rediscover the power of your gospel,
and the name of Jesus resonates around the world,
bringing grace, peace, love and hope.

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

Remember the words of Paul to the Corinthian believers:

*.... for us there is 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.*

So depart now in peace to be the people of God,
and to serve the one Lord, Jesus Christ.

The blessing of almighty God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you now, and abide with you always.

Amen

SERMON

There are some passages we encounter in the Bible that make us wonder quite what we should do with them. Today's passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church might fall into that category. Paul spends a whole chapter talking about whether believers should or shouldn't eat meat that's been sacrificed to pagan gods. Now, even if you're a vegetarian or a vegan, it's not all that likely that your objection to meat has anything to do with pagan gods. So is there anything this chapter of I Corinthians has to say to us?

Well I think there is, but to get to it, we need to understand the context in which Paul was writing. First, we need to understand that, in the ancient world, most people did not often have the opportunity to eat meat. Ordinary folk ate vegetables and fruit and grains. And maybe seafood, depending where they lived. Corinth is a port so fish was probably fairly available there. But meat wasn't often on the menu, and when it was, it would be a minor part of the meal.

The one place you could get a meal of meat was at some of the local temples. Animal sacrifice – which we find repugnant – was pervasive in the ancient world. We shouldn't forget that that was true, not just of pagans, but also of the Jews. The fires in the Temple in Jerusalem were never extinguished, as people came from far and wide to offer the required sacrifices. In fact, it was said that you could *smell* Jerusalem long before you could see it, because of the ever-present odour of burning flesh.

But Paul is talking to people in the Greek world. There would have been many different gods and cults that were present in Corinth, but for most of them, the gods had to be appeased by the offering of sacrifices. And those sacrifices were often animals. It was common for certain *parts* of the animal to be required for the sacrifice; but the other parts were then available to the members of the cult, or even to be sold on to butchers' shops for public sale. With the meat that was retained for the members of the cult, to put it in 21st century Australian terms, they held a big community barbeque and dug in to the rare treat of a meal of meat.

And so you can see the issue that Paul's dealing with. The meat he's talking about had been dedicated to pagan gods. If you were a Christian, was it then permissible to buy it from a butcher? And an even harder question: was it okay to go to the barbeque to get a share of the meat that was on offer? It would seem that the church in Corinth was divided over this matter.

One side was arguing that Christians believed in the one and only true God. Therefore, they should have nothing to do with any aspect of pagan worship. Eating meat sacrificed to a pagan god would involve participating in the worship of that pagan god. Fair enough.

On the other side, though, some Christians argued that, *because* they did not believe in any of the pagan gods, then any pagan rites or ceremonies had no meaning. The meat was just meat. The community barbeque was just a community barbeque. There could be no harm in buying the meat, or going along to the feast. Well, that sounds fair enough too. So who was right?

The obvious thing to do was to ask their church's founder, Paul, what he thought. So it became one on a list of problems they remitted to Paul for his advice.

I began by wondering quite what this issue of meat sacrificed to pagan gods had to do with us. And you may still find yourself wondering that. Before we look at what Paul had to say, I would suggest to you that in our own Christian communities we're not *too* far away from the nature of the Corinthians' problem when we talk about alcohol, or about tobacco smoking. Many Christians are teetotallers, and sometimes very critical of those who drink; while many who *do* drink resent being

told that they are being unchristian, simply because they enjoy a beer or a glass of wine with their meal. Very few Christians smoke; but those who do, and often find themselves treated like a pariah, ask where the practice is prohibited in the Bible.

You see what I mean. The problem about meat in Corinth is not *that* alien to us.

As so often, Paul's advice goes straight to the heart of the matter. He's being asked to rule on which of the two sides in the dispute about meat is right.

Now Paul was often happy to do just that, if the issue at stake was vital, or if he was aware of direct teaching by Jesus that was relevant to it. He wasn't afraid to raise hackles if he needed to. But this vexed question of meat wasn't like that. It didn't seem to be vital, and Paul knew of nothing that Jesus had said about the matter. It would be very difficult to state definitively that one side was right, and the other wrong. And doing so would, unnecessarily, create winners and losers in a church that was already divided.

The heart of the matter, so far as Paul was concerned, *was* that very division in the church. Putting it more bluntly than Paul does, he sees one side – those who don't think the meat should be touched – as simple-minded and weak in their faith; and the other side – those who are happy to eat the meat and go banqueting – as just too smart by half. At first glance, it seems that he tells the smart alecks to pull their heads in; but in fact his advice cuts equally deeply with both camps.

Because for Paul, it's all about loving one another, and strengthening one another's faith. Yes, you *might* be very strong in your faith, he says to the smarties, and you *might* be able to argue your point very convincingly. Yes, no doubt you *are* right in thinking that, because pagan gods don't exist, then it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to them. But *at what cost* do you prosecute your argument? What are you doing to the faith of those who are weaker than you? You are causing them to stumble in their faith, and that is not loving, caring behaviour that places the other ahead of your own. Yes, it is theoretically fine to eat the meat, but *not* if that causes a crisis of faith for someone else for whom Christ died!

But the same argument cuts both ways. If you're on the other team, and convinced that eating the meat is dishonouring of God, you too must be loving in the manner in which you prosecute your case. The bottom line is that to act in a way that weakens the faith of one for whom Christ died is no less than a sin against Christ himself.

Now a principle like that is applicable to the church of any age. We could pretty easily apply it to the situation regarding alcohol which we spoke of a moment ago. I'll enjoy my glass of wine with a meal if I choose, knowing that Jesus drank wine, and that nothing in the Bible comes anywhere near suggesting that's there's anything wrong with moderate alcohol consumption. Indeed, the writer to Timothy explicitly encourages him to take wine with his dinner. But if I share my meal with someone who is an ardent teetotaler, who believes that alcohol is the devil's drink, that it offends God, then I'll leave the wine in the bottle, the bottle out of sight, and the wineglass in the cupboard. Not because I'm a hypocrite, but because I care for my teetotaler friend. I do not want to offend him, let alone to cause him to stumble in his faith. It's not because I'm a hypocrite, but because *Christ died for him!*

Now I don't find that hard at all. I'm not so wedded to my glass of wine that missing out causes me any grief. So does that mean I can forget Paul's teaching here, that I'm so good at the principle of loving my fellow believers that there's nothing for me here?

Well I wish I could. But for many of us, myself included, there's *something*, one thing at least, that

is so dear to us that it threatens division and conflict, and may even be the cause of another's stumbling. Perhaps there's more than one. But I know immediately what my issue is. I know exactly what Paul is saying to me. I find it very hard to keep my mouth shut when I hear fellow Christians speaking whose interpretation of the Bible is very literal. Perhaps they're creationists, and insist that the creation came into being in six literal earthly days. Perhaps they will quote some of the peculiar laws laid down in Leviticus or Deuteronomy, and insist that they continue to apply at all times and in all contexts. I have one friend who *insists* that God is a male, because the pronouns and metaphors for God used in the scriptures are masculine.

When I encounter such folk, I want to show them that I have thought these matters through more carefully than they, that I have the historical perspective that they lack, that my understanding of the Bible is more sophisticated than theirs. In other words, I want to show them that I'm right and they're wrong. I'm just like the smart alecks in Corinth whom Paul so chastises. His advice to them is very much for me. Bite your tongue. Swallow your learning. Have some humility, Paul says to me. Don't be guilty of causing another to stumble in their faith. Because Christ died for them.

I wonder what it is for you. Is there something that you are wedded to, about which there is disagreement in the Church, and which you literally ache to defend? Perhaps there's not, but it's worth a careful examination of our conscience. Maybe it's music – the traditional versus the modern. Maybe it's about infant baptism, or children taking Communion. Maybe it's about having gay couples in the congregation. Or any one of a thousand other matters that divide us and cause pain and conflict in the church. Whatever it is for each of us, we need to remember Paul's teaching. Is the matter absolutely critical to the faith? Or is it a matter of opinion and interpretation and circumstance? Because we do not dare cause another to stumble in their faith, just to assert our own rights and freedom of action, just to show that we're right and the other person is wrong. Why? – because Christ died for them.

It's sometimes good to be reminded that Jesus administered no doctrinal test to those who became his followers. His mandate was simple: Believe and follow me. His earnest prayer was not that his followers would all agree with each other about every tiny detail, but that they would be one. He taught his followers to love their enemies, and to pray for those who persecuted them. At any point, Jesus could have won the argument, proven that he was right, indeed that he was so far ahead of, so much more powerful than, those who opposed him. But he didn't. Jesus acted only and entirely in love. So great was the love of Jesus that he willingly went to his death for those who betrayed him, for those who hated him, for those who spat on him and mocked him, for those who drove in the very nails that pierced him.

Christ died for them! May we follow the example of the Lord we follow, and may we hear and heed the teaching of Paul. We are the guardians of the faith of all around us, not only because Christ died for us, but because he died for them too.

Amen