

When looking at the reading set for this week, I was drawn to the epistle. I think what drew my attention to it was its sheer ridiculousness? As I read it, I heard a voice from Monty Python reading the first line: "Now, concerning food offered to idols..." It's such an unpromising beginning to a reading. I can guarantee that there's absolutely nobody who's watching this who turned on thinking "Oh, I wonder if he's going to say something about food offered to idols today?" Nobody. And if you've tuned in for the first time, and you've heard a reading like that, you might be forgiven for thinking "What's all this about? Why are they still concerned about that kind of thing? How out of touch and out of date can you get?" The beginning of our epistle is so unpromising, so irrelevant, so ridiculous that I just had to preach on it because even here in what looks like the most obscure arcane part of the Bible, there's still something profound that it has to teach us.

There's a lesson here about truth and about how we apply truth, right thinking and authority in our daily lives. And that's a very, very live subject today in our context. And it's a lesson that's as relevant now as it was 2000 years ago in Corinth when Paul wrote the epistle. Before I get too deep into it though, let me just mention the gospel because the reading there from St. Mark has a similar theme. What we see there is Mark the gospel writer drawing a distinction between the scribes who were the religious teachers of the day and Jesus. And what astounded the people, we're told, is that Jesus didn't teach like the scribes. He taught as one with authority it says.

Now, at this point, I should say in passing that the scribes were very particular in what they said. As I said, they were the religious teachers of the day, and they were experts in the religious law. And it was their job to spell out precisely what the Torah said. So a scribe would always begin by saying that there is a teaching that, and would then expound on some point in the law. And they quote all the relevant authorities and buttress their arguments with all the references that have gone before to other texts and to precedents. But when Jesus spoke to the crowd, he spoke with authority. He never referred to other texts or things, but his authority was a personal authority. He made no appeal to an authority beyond himself. And he says something interesting in the gospel of John. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus didn't just speak truth. He was truth. And the truth was evident in his actions.

So let me just get back to the epistle, concerning food sacrificed to idols. There's a context for this teaching which is lost on us. But at the time it was a live issue for the church. In fact, we can probably assume that the church in Corinth had written to Paul, who'd founded the church, to

ask his opinion on this matter that was causing division and upset in the church in Corinth. Much of the meat that was for sale in the market in Corinth would have been sacrificed to idols in the city's many pagan temples. And it was common practice for priests to sell the unused meat to butchers. In fact, given that the best animals were the ones that were sacrificed, you can assume that there was a lively trade because the best meat would be coming from these pagan temples.

Now, clearly there was strong, longstanding Christians in the church in Corinth for whom this was not an issue. They didn't mind what they ate and where it came from. They knew there was only one true God, and the idols had no power and they couldn't care less about the provenance of their meat. But there were others, maybe those who hadn't been Christians so long, recent converts from idol worship who weren't so sure, who weren't so comfortable. They didn't like the idea that the meat they might be eating had been involved in temple worship. They found it harder to forget the association between what they were eating and the old objects of their worship. So, as I say, the Corinthian church asked St. Paul for his advice, should they eat the food that had been sacrificed to idols or not? And Paul offers a wonderful answer, which I think serves to help with other questions, which are more pertinent to us in our culture and context.

Paul says, "We know that there is no reason, no reason why we shouldn't eat the food offered to idols." But as he says, as the argument goes on, that doesn't mean that we should. Knowing the right answer does not necessarily translate into doing the right thing. "The reason for this," Paul says, "Is the need to be sensitive in their case, to those who are unsure about whether it's right to eat the meat offered to idols." Let me quote again what he says. "It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge, that is the knowledge that we're free to eat any meat. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, that they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol and their conscience being weak is defiled. We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off, if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Paul's saying there's nothing wrong with eating the food that's being offered to the idols, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we should.

So if Paul were here right now and we said, "Okay Paul, theologically speaking, the food that's been defiled, has the food been defiled and contaminated by being offered to an idol? Am I free to eat it?" And he'd say, "Yes, you're free to eat it." But if we went on to ask him, should the Corinthians eat such food? He'd say no, even though the

logical answer was yes. So Paul was wise enough to know that there's more to truth than the merely logical, that we don't live in the abstract and that truth needs to be embodied and lived out in our messy illogical world. Knowing the right thing to do must be tempered by love. Knowledge doesn't exist in a vacuum. There's always the context of the community in which knowledge must be applied wisely and lovingly.

Paul's saying, just because you can do something doesn't mean that you should. There were limits to freedom. One might say that faith gives freedom and love governs freedom. St. Paul draws a contrast between knowledge and love, knowledge "puffs up", he writes and love "builds up". We do well to remember this. Truth is more elusive than we might think. Remember that truth is ultimately embodied in the person of Jesus. Pursuing truth involves balancing the authority of knowledge with the authority of love. There are two extremes that when it comes to religious truth, and we're all somewhere on this spectrum between these two poles that I'll just explain, which is why it's good to live in community, with other people at various points along the spectrum. So we maintain a broader vision.

But at one end, one pole of this spectrum, there are those who value above all else, right knowledge. They're always sure of what is right. And such people can be liable to develop an overbearing sense of rightness. They're in danger of being what Paul calls, "puffed up". That's the scribes in the gospel reading. They're puffed up with their knowledge.

On the other extreme, the other pole are those who always prefer to speak of love rather than truth. These people wouldn't like to hold any belief that might offend somebody else. Such a person might find it difficult to say what needs to be said. They could be hampered by an affliction with which the British are very familiar, that of dysfunctional politeness. There's a balance to be struck. Truth matters and so does love. Between those two poles, there's a healthy place to be.

Let me chuck in a bit of chemistry at this point. Sodium is an extremely active element found only in combined form. It always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride, otherwise betterly known as common table salt. Truth and love can be like sodium and chlorine. On their own, they can be difficult, but link them together and they're magnificent. Truth on its own can lead to brutality. Love on its own can drift into

sentimentality. We need both if we're to speak the truth in love.

I think it was this perfect combination of truth and love which Jesus' hearers found so compelling, and it's the example of Jesus whom we are called to follow. We're called to speak the truth in love, to our family, to our neighbors, and to our colleagues. It's what we aspire to do in our church community, and as we pray for our political leaders, that's what we're praying too that they are aiming for.

Amen.