

Christian self-limiting

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Epiphany + 4B – 1 Cor 8 1-13

A man was driving his mother and his son to the shops. His mother noticed he wasn't wearing a seatbelt. She suggested he fasten it but he said he didn't think it was necessary. She thought for a moment, turned to her grandson in the back seat and said, 'Undo your seatbelt darling. Daddy doesn't think we need them.' Her son never drove with an unfastened seatbelt again.

Today, we heard Paul challenge some powerful people who were giving a dangerous example to some very vulnerable ones. The church in Corinth had members who were very smug about their religious knowledge. They claimed a special freedom on the basis of this knowledge. They ate meat at public feasts. But the church in Corinth also had new converts whose faith was quite fragile.

Paul was concerned about Christians openly eating meat in Corinth because almost any meat sold in the marketplace came from animals sacrificed in pagan shrines – sacrificed to idols. Many gentile converts in Corinth came to Christianity from a religion where the relationship between a person and their god was like a protection racket. They'd offer animals as sacrifices to their gods to buy protection from things like illnesses or bad harvests. A recent convert to Christianity might take a long time to stop fearing that their old god still had power to hurt them. They might even be spooked into returning to the 'safety' of their former ways. God forbid.

The more knowledgeable, confident believers knew the local gods didn't actually have any power; they couldn't harm anyone. Paul quoted three slogans from these confident believers in today's reading. One was *All of us possess*

knowledge. That was manifestly wrong in Corinth. There was a definite 'in-crowd' with knowledge, but many others didn't. The other slogans he quoted were *No idol in the world really exists* and *There is no God but one*. By that, the 'in crowd' meant the gods that ignorant people fear don't exist. And if they don't exist, the animals sacrificed to them aren't contaminated by association with them. So any meat we buy is just meat; no more. Before God, I'm free to eat it; so I'll just go ahead and do it openly.

Paul *agrees*, but he challenges their approach. They treat it as a question about correct understanding. But Paul writes about it as a pastoral matter; about caring for other people. Buying and eating this meat might do *you* no harm, but it *could* be a problem for new sisters and brothers in the Church. They all belonged in a wider community where they be invited to weddings and special days where meat would be served at the celebratory feasts. The example to set would be to refuse the meat.

Paul challenges the knowledgeable ones, what if a new Christian who's recently been freed from a life of appeasing idols – someone who looks up to you as an older sister or brother – what if they see you feasting on meat that's probably been sacrificed to idols? Their faith isn't strong like yours; they haven't thought all this through yet; they don't understand yet. They'd just see an older Christian eating with pagans ^{v.10}. How might this challenge their new faith? They may think that if *you* can do it, it must be okay for *them*. Before you know it, they're drawn back into their old ways. Your example could be the cause of their losing faith in Christ.

Paul writes, if my eating meat could make a vulnerable Christian stumble in their faith, I'd give up eating meat. They might be wrong; I might be right. I might have true knowledge. But if I don't have love, I'm nothing. Being right

is nothing compared with loving my sisters and brothers is. If Jesus died for someone weak and ignorant, I'll look after their needs, no matter what I feel I'm giving up.

There's a principle here. It is that confident, mature Christians are called to self-limit for the sake of any whose faith is vulnerable; to *nurture* new Christians, not risk their faith. This self-limiting principle shapes things we do here at St John's to include and build up people who'd be left out if we just did things to suit ourselves.

We use service booklets instead of the prayer book, hymn book, reading sheet, pew sheet quadrilateral. The prayer book is obscure enough to newcomers without three other things in their hands and seldom anyone to help them find their way. Cradle Anglicans might feel at home with this and even like it. But it's alienating and humiliating to newcomers. So we self-limit and offer a booklet. Everyone is on an equal footing that way. And the booklet helps those who can't attend in person to participate as fully as possible from home as well.

We also serve communion without requiring everyone to climb steps – so everyone can participate equally regardless of physical constraints. We accommodate people's preferences for kneeling or standing. We use inclusive language, and we have the Eucharistic setting in both our main languages. We put our individual preferences to one side because we're called to keep everyone together – *everyone* welcome. We don't insist on our right to eat meat, as it were, because it's more important to look after the sensibilities of newcomers, or anyone who, for whatever reason, might stumble if they struggle to do what we decide is normal. I'm sure you can think of ways this principle of Christian self-limiting might be considered on a wider scale. But the vulnerable person's welfare is always the priority. Amen