



Auckland Community Church

Asserting Our Identity?

Given by Mark Henrickson on the 12th February 2006

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become an opportunity for the weak to take offence. (1 Cor 8:9, own translation)

The readings tonight are rich and complex, and we could take hours in a Bible study to unpack and discuss them - but I won't. I would like to focus most of our attention on the reading from 1 Corinthians, because I think it is possibly one of the most troublesome ones in scripture for lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians living in the 21st century (*I'm not addressing trans-persons here because the ethical challenges raised are, I think, quite separate from those raised about LGB identities and behaviours.*). As always, Paul offers some challenges in his first letter to the young church in Corinth. I've never preached on these three texts together, so I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify my own thinking about them.

Deuteronomy 18, as we heard, establishes the office of prophet: it is the only passage in the first testament to do so. The office of prophet is here established as a divine institution, although it is only with Samuel that the office gains real legitimacy. In this passage the rule is established that the truth of a prophecy will be assessed by whether or not it comes true. A true prophet must speak on behalf of God, not on behalf of him or herself.

The Gospel reading from Mark occurs at the outset of that gospel and of Jesus' ministry (and parallels Luke 4). It is the familiar story of Jesus commanding the unclean spirit to come out of a man in the temple. This passage is important for three reasons. Firstly, it establishes Jesus spiritual and legal authority over unclean spirits in clear and very strong language. Secondly, this story introduces Jesus to the community, who are, to use today's language, shocked and awed by Jesus actions. Thirdly, we need to know that possession by an unclean spirit left people in a state of ritual uncleanness, and made them unfit for communion with God. Someone who was possessed was literally hopelessly out of contact with God. What Jesus did, then, was to restore this nameless man to the community of faith, and into communion and right relationship with God.

Now to Corinthians. Paul is at some pains in this letter to talk about the building up of the community of faith. In this section of the letter he debates whether it is appropriate for followers of Christ to eat food offered to idols. As a Christian in the 21st century I never gave this passage much thought until I accompanied a friend of mine to a Buddhist celebration in Glen Eden. The festival was accompanied, of course, by bountiful servings of fantastic home-cooked Thai food, of which I must say I partook perhaps overzealously. For faithful Jews of the first century, such an activity would be unthinkable, for it would be the same as acknowledging that there were other gods in addition to God.

However, Paul makes the point that this is not really a problem for Christians. The issue is not the food itself, but the offering of it to idols that makes it unclean to Jews. What is important in this whole discussion, says Paul, is love, for love builds up the body of the faithful. Paul introduces love as the guiding principle of the new community of faith, because love is the fulfilment of the Law.

This leads Paul to the conclusion that of itself, eating food offered to idols is meaningless and morally neutral, because for the follower of Christ, idols are nothing. However, this is knowledge, not love. If our eating such food, that is, if our apparently violating the Law, is a stumbling block to someone of weaker faith - or as my own translation would put it, if

engaging in such action becomes an opportunity for the weak to take offence, then we should not do it, because faithful persons must defer to those of weaker conscience. I wonder now if I would have been so eager to indulge at the Buddhist festival if some of my more fundamentalist friends had been there to observe me.

This concept of weakness is something that is of great interest to Paul. The Greek word used here, *asthenes*, means according to my lexicon, "a weakness in faith, which, through lack of advanced knowledge considers externals of the greatest importance". The word occurs more than twice as many times in I and II Corinthians as it does everywhere else in the New Testament combined.

Paul was writing in the very early days of the life of the Church, and by using this word he shows that he is extremely concerned about building up a strong community of faith. He envisions a community where the strong support the weak, so that the entire community remains united, and ultimately able to survive amongst the competing faiths in the old Roman Empire. The strong, therefore, must therefore carefully consider the appearance and effect of their actions on the weaker of faith, and not casually ignore historical and social customs and traditions simply because they no longer apply.

In his letters Paul was not creating a systematic handbook for ethical behaviour. He was reacting to specific situations at specific times. He believed that the community of faith was a temporary solution to the problem of how followers of Christ should live in the time between Christ's resurrection and his imminent return. In I Corinthians Paul addresses a number of "lifestyle challenges" to the young community, including marriage (he was against it), spiritual gifts, incest, disorder in the church, and the proper observance of the Lord's Supper, among other issues. All of these issues occur in the larger context of divisions in the early church and the competing allegiances to the apostles Paul, Cephas and Apollo. It is clear from the letters that there were significant divisions among the various factions of the church, and that Paul did not always prevail.

I have suggested that the passage we read tonight should be very troubling to LGB Christians. I said so, because it is fairly obvious, from the state of the debate in most Christian denominations around the world, that LGB identity and behaviour is very troubling to some - perhaps even the majority - of people of faith. If we are to take Paul at his word, here, it would seem that LGB people should be very cautious about asserting - dare I say "flaunting" - our identity and behaviour in front of people who, because of what we would say is their lack of advanced knowledge, consider appearances of the greatest importance? A group of people who therefore are likely to take offence at us, and therefore become even weaker in their own faith?

To such questions I am strongly inclined to say "bollocks!" (I've always wanted to say "bollocks" from a pulpit), but the Corinthians reading still challenges us about how are we are to live our identities, our lives and our relationships in a church that is quite literally tearing itself apart over our very existence. What is the mature, compassionate, loving thing to do? Simply arguing our way with knowledge is unPauline, for Paul tells us that knowledge puffs up: it is easy to become self-righteous in the face of the horrific, and unchristian language that has come our way over the years and the centuries. Where's your Christian love? Where's your Christian charity? we ask our haters and wreckers. Paul demands of us the same question: where is our love? Where is our willingness to build up the body of Christ?

These are not in any way simple questions that lend themselves to clever answers. Each of us in this room, I think, has come to our own answers. Many of us have simply decided to pick up our toys, leave mainstream churches, and go somewhere, or create somewhere, where we are wanted: the very presence of many of us here tonight gives testimony to that decision. But equally, I know that many people here do "double duty" -

that is, continue to participate in mainstream church of a Sunday morning, and also are here tonight. We continue to build up, as it were, two bodies of faithful persons.

I want to acknowledge the complexity of the decisions of both groups of people. Because both groups are also faced with the vast majority of LGB people in New Zealand and around the world who have said "Stuff the church - they don't give a stuff about me, and I don't give a stuff about them!" We are left with the painful dilemma of being stuffed but faithful witnesses to Christ to a deeply wounded and disaffected community of LGB people on the one hand, and at the same time trying to be loving witnesses to churches that wish that we would just go away. I can think of no other group today where that tension is so acute.

Fortunately, I can also think of no other group of people better equipped to manage those competing challenges. We as a people are very used to handling dual, and even multiple, identities. We know what it is like not to trust the prevailing wisdom, and we know what it is like to build communities where none exists. Our situation today is very like that of the early church to whom Paul is writing. But we must not make the error of equating Paul's admittedly temporary ethical advice with the permanent transforming love of Christ. Although Paul affirmed the standard social norms of his age, including the roles of women and slaves, he was also aware that his lifestyle advice was only that - advice to a specific situation, not a theological or doctrinal requirement.

Our task, I propose, is to be prophetic and reconciling witnesses to the eternal, perfect, transforming love of Christ both to those within the Church (including ourselves) and to those outside the Church. In this Epiphanytide we are called to take the missionary position of being loving both to the broken body of Christ, and to those who have been broken by the body of Christ. In neither instance do I propose for a moment that we give up, conceal or compromise our identities as LGB people.

Our role is to offer a prophetic ministry to the Church, knowing that the truth of that prophecy will be born out in time. Prophetic ministries are always uncomfortable, both to the prophets and to those that hear them. Tonight we heard that prophets must never become full of themselves, or self-righteous: what they proclaim must be for the good of the whole body of faithful persons. The prophecy we proclaim to those outside the church must be after the fashion of Jesus, who in tonight's gospel restored a nameless man to the community of faith, and into a restored relationship with God. Jesus did so with authority, and even more importantly, with compassion.

These prophetic and reconciling ministries are well-known to this community. From the readings tonight what we know is that they are ministries as old as the community of the people of God. Let us then be mindful of the weak within and the broken without, being absolutely assured of the continuing, healing love of Christ, who lives in us, surrounds us, and loves through us.