

Now may I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I started to look at today's readings at the beginning of the week I was drawn to our Epistle for the day, that letter from Paul to the Church at Corinth. I think it drew my attention because of its ridiculousness. As I read it, I could hear the voices of Monty Python in my head. "Now concerning food offered to idols..." It's such an unpromising beginning to a reading. I can guarantee that there's no one in church today who asked walking here or driving here was thinking, ah, I wonder if the preacher's gonna address the topic of food offered to idols today? No one. And if there is someone in church today who doesn't normally come, in fact who's never been to church before and you hear that reading, you'd be forgiven for think what a weird, irrelevant book this is.

The beginning of that Epistle, it's so unpromising, so irrelevant, so ridiculous that I just had to preach on it because even here couched in the most arcane terms is a great lesson for us, because I think as we look at that Epistle we'll see that there is a deep lesson in there which is of relevance to us and to our world and to how we treat each other in our church community. And the reading's relevant because it speaks to us about truth, authority and right action. In fact, all of today's readings address such things. The old testament reading made a distinction between the true prophets like Moses, who speak the words that God has put into their mouth, and also the false prophets, who speak in the name of other Gods or who dare to speak on their own authority words that God has not commanded them to speak. And then in our Gospel reading there's a similar distinction between Jesus, who astounded the people because he spoke with authority, and then the scribes whose teaching lacked such authority.

And I should point out in passing that the scribes were very particular about what they said. They were experts in the religious law. It was their job to spell out precisely what the Torah said and they'd always begin their teaching by saying things like, "There is a teaching that ...", quoting earlier authorities and previous texts. But when Jesus spoke he spoke with a personal authority. He referred to nothing else. He relied on no authority beyond himself and Jesus says something very interesting in John's Gospel. He says,

"I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus didn't just speak truth, he was truth and this truth was evident in his actions.

So, let's return to our Epistle, concerning food offered to idols. There is a context to this teaching, it's lost on us, but at the time it was a live issue for the church in Corinth. In fact, the Christians in Corinth have probably asked Paul for his advice because we've got these letters in the New Testament. Well, what we don't have is the church's letters to Paul. We only have his replies, but judging from the tone of what he's saying, the Christians in Corinth have asked Paul about this matter.

Much of the meat that was for sale in the markets of Corinth would have been sacrificed to idols in one of the city's many pagan temples. It was common practice for the priests of the temple to sell their unused meat to butchers. In fact, because the custom when making a sacrifice was to offer the best of your animals, the best meat in Corinth, the chances are, it would have been offered at one point to an idol in a temple. Now, clearly there were long-standing mature Christians in the church in Corinth for whom this was not an issue. They knew there was only one true God, that idols were only statues with no power, and they couldn't care less about the providence of their meat. But there were others, maybe those who were recent converts from idol worship who weren't so sure. They felt uncomfortable with the thought that they may be eating meat that has at one point been involved in a pagan sacrifice.

They found it harder to forget the association between what they were eating and the former objects of their worship. So, the Corinthian church asked Paul for his advice. Should they eat the food offered to idols or not? And Paul offers a wonderful response, which I think serves to help us with other questions more pertinent to our situation than the question of food offered to idols. Paul says we know there is no reason why we can't eat anything that's been offered to idols. There's no reason why we shouldn't but that doesn't mean that we should. Knowing the right answer is not the same thing as truthful action and the reason for this is the need to be sensitive to those who are unsure or who are uncomfortable about the question of what to do with meat offered to idols. Let me quote a bit of what he says in our reading.

"It is not everyone whoever who has this knowledge about the fact that they are free to eat the food. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol and their conscience being weak is defiled. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Paul's saying just because you can do something doesn't mean that you should. There are limits to freedom. Knowing the right thing to do must always be tempered by love and a concern for others. Knowledge doesn't exist in a vacuum. There's always the context of a community in which knowledge must be applied lovingly and wisely. Faith gives freedom, love governs freedom. And Paul draws a contrast between knowledge and love. Knowledge, he says, puffs up, love builds up. And we do well to remember this. Truth is often much more elusive than we might think it is. Remember for us truth is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

Pursuing truth involves following him and balancing the authority of knowledge with the authority of love. And as I was thinking about this sermon this week and what to think, the news was on in the background as it always is and the whole question of DACA and the Dreamers kept coming up, which seems to me to have direct parallels to the principle that Paul is working out here. There is a right knowledge based answer to the question of what to do with the Dreamers, that is, they all came here illegally, and they have no legal right to stay. And there's a loving answer to the problem, which is, they've grown up here, it's cruel to deport them, they know nothing else. And I can see both sides of that argument and I'm delighted that there is a bi-partisan group working on it as I think the answer lies in coming up with a solution that honors both those ways of thinking.

And so, there's in religious discussions there are two extremes when it comes to questions of religious truth. And we're all, all of us in this church, we're somewhere on the spectrum between these two. That's why we need a community to give us a broader vision and context for our thinking. On one side at one extreme there are those who stress right knowledge. They are always sure of what's right. Such people can develop an overbearing sense of rightness at what St. Paul called puffed up. And on the other

side there are those who always prefer to speak of love rather than truth. And these people, this extreme, would like to hold any belief that might offend anybody else. Such people might find it difficult to say what needs to be said, to speak truth. They might be hampered by what I have called dysfunctional politeness. We've seen in today's readings that truth does matter. Not all prophets said equally good things. There were true prophets. There were false prophets.

Jesus' teachings were better than the teachings of the scribes. He taught with the authority of truth, they didn't. But love matters too. Love builds up. There's a balance to be struck. So, Paul expressed it like this when he encouraged his congregations to speak the truth in love. That's holding the balance perfectly. Let me chuck in a bit of chemistry here for those more scientifically inclined amongst us. Sodium is an extremely active element found only in combined forms. It is always linked to another element. Chlorine on the other hand is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. And when these two, sodium and chlorine, are combined the result is sodium-chloride, which some people know is salt, the kind of salt we have on our tables. And truth and kindness can be like sodium and chlorine, they need to be linked together. Truth on its own can lead to brutality. Kindness on its own can drift into sentimentality. We need both if we are to speak the truth in love.

So, as I conclude, I hope that I've been able to make something of the rather unpromising beginning to our Epistle. As I said, I think it's relevant to all of us especially in a church congregation like this, which is the context of which those words were first written. We had a wonderful annual meeting last Sunday full of joy and positivity. And what's clear is we have a very good base from which we can move forward and as we move forward or we start making big decisions about our vision, about how we use our resources, we're not always going to agree. And that's when we need to heed the lesson of what Paul says in the passage that we've been looking at this morning. May we hear at St. James be a community that gets the balance right, that always finds a way to speak for truth in love.