

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 15th 2015

Today's readings, focusing on leprosy and on meat sacrificed to idols, might seem to be pretty remote from contemporary Christian life. That conclusion, I think, would be wrong. St. Paul tells us in a couple of places that "things written in times past were written for our instruction". The church teaches us that the Holy Spirit has seen to the preservation of these passages in the scriptures precisely because they are applicable, not just for us today, but for Christians in all ages. That's what "inspiration" means.

Take the situation in St. Paul's Corinth behind our second reading. Much of the meat available for purchase or consumption had earlier come from an animal sacrificed as an offering to a cult idol. Often, dinner parties took place in temple halls, in part because not everybody had a house big enough to host a sizable party. Many of Paul's converts would have been members of extended families who were still adherents of the many gods worshiped in first century Greece, and who would naturally be a part of family celebrations. Should Christians join in the party? And should they eat the meat that was the foundation of the feast?

The Corinthian Christian community was divided on what to do. Some, whom we might call "progressives" or "liberals", argued that the so-called gods were mere human creations and had no actual existence. Therefore meat sacrificed to these non-gods was no different from meat butchered in the ordinary way. It could be enjoyed with impunity. By contrast, others whom we might call "conservatives" or "traditionalists", weren't so sure and argued that, at very least, eating such meat give a bad example and possibly flirted with something akin to devil worship.

Today's reading comes from the conclusion of Paul's resolution of this moral dilemma faced by his converts. A few verses earlier Paul had responded that such meat could be eaten, that the so-called gods were, indeed, non-existent. Paul thus agreed with the "progressive" wing in their analysis, but he disagreed with their tactics, their insisting on their right to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul was concerned not only to resolve their problem but to give them (and us) a tool or yardstick to help in future cases. Paul stresses that, if eating such meat scandalized my brothers, then it shouldn't be done. He said that focusing on my rights was wrong, that the focus had to be on what built up the community, on what exercising my rights might do to my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today's verses are directed to the "conservative" wing of Paul's church. Don't go looking for trouble, he tells them. If you're at a family feast and you're served meat, don't ask where it came from. Just enjoy the party. For both groups, the solution is to think and act first and foremost for others. Neither protest your rights nor parade your scruples.

Do we see any applicability to the Christian church today?

In case we might think that this de-emphasis of personal rights isn't central to Christianity, we need only recall Jesus' admonition to his disciples at the time of his arrest in Gethsemane, "Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father, who would promptly send more than 12 legions of angels?" (Matt 26:53).

It's a fine line we have to walk. We need to be concerned – very concerned, in fact – for the rights of others – the disenfranchised, the minority, those on the margins of our society and church. We need to act always on their behalf. By contrast, with Christianity, it's never about my rights. Jesus did not assert His rights. Neither can we, if we are to be true to the name we are called and to the gospel we are to preach.

There is a final aspect of Paul's resolution of this Corinthian dispute that would be easy for us to miss, given our individualistic culture. We too easily visualize our status as Christians as if that meant we were members of an organization. That's partly true, but mostly wrong. As Christians, we are literal members of a new family with exactly the same obligations to one another as we have toward the members of a blood kinship family. Families and family responsibilities were of primary importance in the ancient Mediterranean world. It's a trait the Corinthian Christians already possessed and valued (and one we moderns tend to lack). Paul builds on that cultural value, giving his converts a tool to help them solve such questions for themselves. "Look", he says, "You already do this for your blood kin. Now, as Christians, your family is bigger than it used to be. All Christians are your sisters and brothers."

It is through Baptism that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus and hence of one another. We are children of Jesus' father – our Father (as we say in the Lord's prayer).

Robert P. Heaney-John A. Creighton University Professor Emeritus