**A close up of a sign

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Jonah 1.1-2, 3.5, 4.1-2  
1 Corinthians 8.1-13  
31st January 2021  
  
 Love is always Relational**

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME  
  
Hudson Taylor is an honoured name amongst British Christians. He was the founder of the China Inland Mission, the forerunner of what is now OMF International, once based just down the road at Gerrard’s Cross.  
  
During his time in 19th century China the Mission was served by 800 missionaries, opened 125 schools and saw 18,000 people take up the Christian faith. Taylor also campaigned against the use of opium, learnt three dialects of Chinese and assisted with the translation of the New Testament into one of these.  
  
Yet, for a time, in the 1850’s Hudson Taylor was shunned by many good upstanding British Christians. The reason? Well, they thought he’d gone too far in adopting Chinese dress and wearing his hair in a traditional pig tail.  
  
Yet Hudson Taylor thought this essential. If he wore his respectable European frock coat the Chinese described him as ‘The Black Devil’ even though he entered their village with medical supplies. But if he wore Chinese dress, they gave him their time and listened to his message.  
  
Taylor, whilst working and serving in China, was far more socially and culturally aware than his critics were at home.   
  
Being sensitive to the traditions and expectations around us is surely at the centre of today’s second reading, from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.  
  
Back in his day, in a Greek city such as Corinth, with so many temples dedicated to the worship of a variety of gods, it would have been hard to find meat for sale that hadn’t already been used as a temple offering, then ‘repackaged’ and ‘re-sold’.

So, what is the most loving response to this situation? How culturally aware should we be?

Some in the Corinthian church are not bothered at all by the legacy of this meat. *It’s just meat*, they say. *And as we don’t believe in the idols to whom it was previously offered why should we be bothered or offended by its previous life.* These Christians would have happily purchased it, cooked it and eaten it.  
  
Yet another group in the church were bothered and became deeply worried by what was going on. They felt the meat was in some way contaminated by its previous usage. Perhaps this group had already paid a high personal price in leaving the various Temple cults in the city. They were no longer welcome at family gatherings since their baptism into the Christian Church. They could no longer work for some employers who were great Temple people or live in the residential quarter next to a particular Temple. Or maybe this group is hyper aware that if their former friends at these Greek temples see Christians eating this meat they will think their worship of such gods as **Poseidon, Apollo, Zeus or Dionysos is perfectly OK, even condoned by the Church.**

So, to them, eating the meat that had been used in Temple worship was a step to far. It devalued their spiritual journey and belittled the personal cost behind their pilgrimage towards Christ and might lead others to remain as worshippers in these Corinthian Temples.  
  
In today’s reading Paul ‘gets’ all that, and he urges the meat eaters of Corinth to ‘get’ it too. To become culturally aware of the views, the needs and the story of those around them and live accordingly, with kindness and sensitivity.  
  
At one level it seems self-evident – an act of love. Yet at many other levels it begs a few questions.   
  
When would it be right to challenge the non-meat eaters? Should their experience forever define the Church’s stance, or would it be healthier for them to ‘move on’ and leave behind their former Temple experience? And is the practise of not eating meat just window dressing instead of directly challenging the belief systems of those who still frequent the Temples of Zeus and Apollo? And, even more importantly would the method of a pastoral Paul have actually been the same as a confrontational Jesus?  
  
Well, that’s the challenge before us in today’s sermon – what does it mean to be part of a community in which two reactions to one situation are possible, and how might we live in such a conflicting context in a spirit of love and mutual respect?

**Love is always Relational**  
  
So, imagine a Church Meeting in Corinth with the issue of eating meat offered to idols on the agenda. It’s a big turn-out tonight. Half the members are really hoping their church votes for a ban on meat eating. The other half sees absolutely nothing wrong with this and are minded to vote against it, even though Paul’s letter was read out at the service on Sunday.

These are good people. They already love each other. Yet this issue has divided them. Both groups are full of integrity – the meat eaters believe that in serving this at their meals they show their disbelief in idols. The meat avoiders believe their faith in God is tainted by having such dishes on the menu and might give the wrong message to those outside the Church.  
  
Tonight’s meeting won’t be easy, and neither will the next church social and the choice of a main course!

The truth is that we human beings, even though we might agree on many issues, often come up against some that split us down the middle.  
  
In 1 Corinthians 8 St Paul says having ‘knowledge’ isn’t enough. Knowledge is never the same as wisdom. Knowledge always needs another ingredient, love.  
  
Of course, theological knowledge makes the case that if idols, or at least the gods they represent, don’t exist, eating the meat that has been offered to them isn’t a problem in that it can’t be tainted by something that isn’t actually there.  
  
But that’s not the point, says Paul. To this knowledge you must add love.  
  
What may be OK for you, might not be for someone else. A worshipper at one of these Temples sees you eating the meat that came from his Temple and comes away with the idea that Christians are happy with that meat, which is very close to drawing the conclusion that Christians are happy with idols – and that, says Paul, would be an own goal of epic proportions.

So, eating meat in this particular situation says Paul, is neither the loving thing to do, or the right impression to give.  
  
But obviously this wasn’t self-evident, at least not to everyone and there seem to be some in the Corinthian church who were impatient with such a way of thinking. Maybe they even believed Paul was compromising his principles. *Idols exist, but the gods they are supposed to represent don’t* – say the meat eaters, so pass me another hamburger.  
  
Of course, Paul partly agreed with them too. He’d be the first in line to say there was only one true God. Yet, he’d also be first in the queue to do everything he could to help an idol worshipper come to faith in Jesus Christ and he simply didn’t believe that, in this situation, eating meat offered in idol worship would help such a person.  
  
It’s as if the knowledge in his head said: *you could do this, you could eat the meat*. But the love in his heart then chimed in: *but it would confuse those who saw you do it and might even be taken as approval of idol worship by those attending these Temples.*Now, just maybe, in other cities like Ephesus, the advice might have been different. But here in Corinth, Paul says abstaining from the meat is the most loving, and therefore the wisest thing to do.  
  
This is the principle that led the majority of 19th century Non-Conformist churches in Britain to abandon the use of alcohol in Communion. With so much drunkenness around, when a father, say, spent a week’s wages in one night down the pub rather than putting money on the family table for food, the likes of Baptists and Congregationalists decided to abandon a common chalice, use non fermented wine and introduce individual cups. They might have thought drinking wine in moderation was fine, but not for that reformed alcoholic attending church now struggling to support his family.  
  
It's the situational aspect of all this that makes it really difficult.  
  
We might love it if the Bible was just a book of rules that were totally straightforward and easy to put into practice in any situation. But it isn’t.   
  
Take the injunction not to steal. Imagine you live in Tanzania and you are out walking one day, with your family, through the carrot field. You have no job, you and your children haven’t eaten for days and life is bleak. The carrots are ready, do you pull a few to share together quell the aching hunger, or tell your daughter to put it back because of the eighth commandment.

Well, when we were in Tanzania we were told that’s a common scenario. And the wise Christian farmer who took us round his carrot field said – *yes, we know technically it’s stealing, but as long as those who are hungry don’t actually take the carrots home and eat them in situ instead, we look the other way and never prosecute*. We think of it, he said, as a form of social service offered to those in need by the village.

Ethics are rarely simple and an action often has to be judged just as much by its outcome as it does by its nature.  
  
The challenge for us, I believe is to embrace the reality that love has many faces. Love is a small word, yet its breadth is enormous.  
  
We know that sometimes love will be accepting and welcoming, yet at other times challenging and even indignant as it seeks to protect others. There’s encouraging love and tough love, each dependant on the situation and context in which we find ourselves.

Just consider the differences between some of the encounters of Jesus and Paul. When Jesus speaks to those hanging on to a false or narrow interpretation of the religious law he doesn’t mince his words, he challenges them to move on and live with broader definitions. Yet, when Paul considers those who are still bothered about eating meat offered to idols, he doesn’t challenge their logic but instead, reins in those who have already made the leap out of that world.  
  
Jesus and Paul respond differently because of the situation. Because love has many different faces. Because we all need to put in the work to add love to knowledge and come up with wisdom.

Sometimes we are not prepared to do this. We fall back on watertight rules and absolutist values. We become self-righteous, like Hudson Taylor’s critiques, simply not understanding the context of other people’s situations.  
  
Today’s reading from the Jewish scriptures hints at this. Jonah, although at first reluctant to go to Nineveh and preach, eventually accepts his challenge. He’s now convinced God should raise the place to the ground because of the people’s disobedience.  
  
When they repent and return to God, and when God tempers his justice with mercy and forgives, Jonah is furious and accuses God of going against his own rules. Jonah might have knowledge, but he hasn’t mixed it with love so ends up with something which certainly isn’t wisdom.  
  
You know at first glance the controversy in 1 Corinthians 8, about meat offered to idols, seems a million miles away from our lives in 2021. Yet the principles behind it are bang up to date.

Today’s world, its culture and challenges move at quite a rate. Often the ethical issues we confront are not even mentioned in the Bible, so how do we deal with them?

In our reading today Paul’s message is that love is always relational. It’s simply not enough to quote a rulebook at someone and think that’s God’s way. As one commentator I read has put it: *When getting it right is foremost, people usually get relationships wrong.*  
  
Wisdom takes a lot of work, it’s usually an ongoing process with as much listening as talking and it’s always about justice being tempered by mercy.

May God bless us with his wisdom that we might live in such a way that we honour him with integrity even as we seek to live lovingly, kindly and respectfully alongside others.  
  
May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that great community of wisdom and love. Amen.  
  
*Ian Green, Amersham, 21st January 2021*