

Head and Heart

28th January 2024 Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Deuteronomy 18:15 - 21

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8: 1 - 13

Mark 1: 21 - 28



The Christian's Overalls!

The readings for this Sunday highlight a recent radio conversation about the relevance of the Church and Christian teaching in our contemporary society. At one time our laws and living standards were mostly grounded on words from the Bible which would have been learned at home and school from childhood. Now, we live in a multi-culture country of people springing from many different origins and social norms, where the church is often in the background of everyday life.

In our Deuteronomy reading the God people's journey to their promised land was at its close. In the territory of Moab where they waited to cross the river Jordan, Moses prepared them to enter and settle the new lands. He warned them of trials which lay ahead as they moved among communities of faith, law and religious practices which were quite different to their own. But, he explained, God was still going before them and would give them prophets who would take on his own work. Like him they would be in tune with the Lord, conveying by his Spirit, words of guidance to help all the people be faithful to the Lord. Over succeeding years many prophets would come – some true, some false. The true preacher of the Gospel is still called to that ministry of hearing and preaching God's messages – an awesome and sometimes fearfully courageous task, quite removed from that of being a congregation entertainer. In a similar way the people themselves would be living prophets in their new communities, witnessing to the overall commandments of love – for God and for neighbours.

The growing Christian community in Corinth faced the same problem of infiltrating a different, multi-cultural society. The great commercial city was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia in southern Greece. It had a very mixed population and a considerable number of religious centres and temples where people, believing in many gods, worshipped. Their rituals often involved pagan practices which the strict Jew, like Paul, would describe as idolatrous, immoral, and sacrificial. The Jesus people were a mix of those from the Jewish community and converts from pagan ways. Living and working together could not be easy,

especially when it came to problems like using meat from the market. Some of the meat which they bought had first been offered to pagan gods in temple rituals. Was it right for the Christian to use these profitable pagan leftovers? As is still the way with Church decisions, there had been much discussion and sharing of knowledge. Some argued there could be no harm in using the meat which may be at bargain price. Christ had given them freedom. The meat was not going to harm them. In fact, it could bring them closer to the neighbours they wished to win for Christ. Jewish believers would be aghast at the thought. But, Paul says, it may encourage some who were new to the Christian Way to compromise their worship with pagan prayers and practice, and he would not want to do anything which would lead others astray - *cause his brother to stumble*- or to cause division in the church over debatable rules. The church of my times has faced similar issues, over alcohol, dancing, investments, and more recently the enormous divisive questions of human sexuality.

Paul is recommending, not more rules, but keeping the basic commandments – love God, love your neighbours. Let love for one another be your *overall witness*. He repeats this when writing to the Colossian church, *'you are to be clothed in compassion, generosity, gentleness, patience... Over all these clothes, put on love ... (Col 3.12f)* Put on your Christian work overalls – with the sign of a cross on the left breast pocket to remind you who you work with and for!

Mark introduces the beginning of Jesus' ministry with a picture of him as Love at work. Love was his authority. When he preached in the Capernaum synagogue the congregation responded with amazement at the way he taught. It was not the same as the demanding, rigid sermons by the teachers of the law. It was the authoritative word of God, soaked in love. The arrival of a screaming man with physical, mental, and spiritual problems brought the same response – *What amazing authority! What love!* Love which even repels evil. I would be keen to know and hear the finer details of the story... I wonder how much love the synagogue members had shown this man throughout his life?

Prayer – based on Psalm 111

Lord, I love the house of prayer and the singing of choir and congregation.

It makes me want to give my whole life to your praise; to sing of all your kind and gracious gifts; to feel the heart-surge which accompanies memories of your majesty and holiness; of your faithfulness;

of the security of your eternal laws of love.

In the music of the choirs, I catch the sounds of heaven's worship,

In word and song, I can honour and obey you; Love and praise you for ever.



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