Speak Up! 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 as a Model for Expository Preaching

My good friend of more than 20 years standing, Pastor John Gillespie, invited me to preach at the Grace Community Church, Looe (notice I carefully did not say 'his church'), but shortly before my visit he expressed some concern, "Brother," he said rather earnestly, "I just need you to know that I normally preach for about 45 minutes."

"Goodness me," I replied, feigning shock as best as I could, "I'll try to cut down". In all fairness, while listening to some people for 20 minutes becomes something of a meditation on eternity, 20 minutes is not all that long, especially when trying to do justice to a tricky scriptural passage. Possibly the greatest British preacher of the last century, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, would not preach on TV because they would neither give him enough time nor allow any liberty to vary the time-slot that he was allocated.

Someone once said to me that the best way for the church to have a generation of new preachers is for them to listen and to study good preachers. The Church of England and the Methodist Church both have model sermons as part of their doctrinal statements or standards. The Church of England has the two Books of Homilies, http://allsaintsgreenville.org/Faith/Homilies/ , which are two books of 33 sermons (see Article XXXV of the Thirty-nine Articles) the first volume written largely by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (published in 1547) and the second volume written by Bishop John Jewell (published in 1571). The Methodist Church has the Sermons of John Wesley (sometimes called the Forty-four or Fifty-three sermons), http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/ , these being required reading for Methodist preachers, many of whom have remarked, 'surely the preaching of John Wesley that gathered congregations the size of football crowds cannot have been this dull'.

In theological college, we used to have to preach in sermon classes – it is a legend that I made an appeal (what some people would term an 'altar call') at the end of the sermon class and that three students and the tutor came forward – it would have been good were it to have been true but it is only a legend. It reminds me of another colleague's trial service which was conducted in a local church. "How did he get on?" I asked. "Not bad," came the reply. "Four were saved, three were healed, two were exorcised from demonic oppression and one was raised from the dead. We're giving him a 'D' because he had the intercessions before the sermon."

If I understand it correctly preaching is rather like 'Mozart', who incidentally died the same year as John Wesley, the accidental founder of the modern Methodist movement. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, died 5 December 1791 (one day he was composing and the next day he was decom. …). While the music of Mozart, or any great composer, or the work of a different kind of artist (painter, sculptor), can be subjected to critical analysis, there is something personal, individual and subjective about our appreciation of music, art, literature – perhaps preaching too.

When I was a little boy, like many other boys, I wanted to be a great footballer. I was delighted when a short coaching TV series was going to be presented by one of the greatest players of all time, Manchester United and Northern Ireland footballer, George Best. The series was a bit of a disappointment causing my Dad to remark, "the trouble is, he doesn't know how he does it."

So, with all those provisos in place (we must have adequate time, we must expect God to be at work, there is no sermon recipe, even some of the great preachers don't know how they do it, and what really counts is the Holy Spirit's anointing), it's Friday morning and you are preaching on Sunday, worse still it is Saturday evening and you are speaking to the church youth group the next day and you have one word written on your note pad in big letters – four big letters – not the Biblical Tetragrammaton, rendered in English as YHWH (Yahweh or old English, Jehovah) but four other letters HELP. I do not claim to be the preaching equivalent of George Best but I hope that my feeble endeavours here might at least give some insight into how someone has been having a go at preparing sermons and studies (never a 'talk' – how does anyone exude passion or fervour in a 'talk') for 30 years.

The task is to present something meaningful on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. These days I prepare all my sermons on the computer, so the first thing I do is to get the whole of the scripture passage under consideration onto the computer screen. In days B.C. (before computer), I would sometimes enlarge the scripture passage on a photocopier and before the photocopier (yes, I've been preaching that long), write it out by hand. That enables me constantly to focus on and refer to the text – and to mark or emphasise the text without necessarily defacing my best Bible – though having a working Bible to which you might feel able to do that is also a good idea.

So let's do it.

> Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.
>
> (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Now that I am able to use the computer, I often remove the signposts from the text (chapters and verses which help us find our way around but are not part of the Word of God). That leaves me with 302 words – which I would judge a relatively long passage on which to speak. Whatever the length of passage, I ask some preliminary questions of the text. What kind of writing is it? It's a letter. Who wrote the letter and who were the first recipients? The writer was the Apostle Paul and the recipients were the Church at Corinth. What is the background to this book of the Bible (this letter)? The new church at Corinth has issues of how a Christian can live faithfully in a largely pagan culture. We might helpfully look at what comes immediately before and immediately after the selected passage, to see if that helps put the scripture passage in a broader context. Immediately before, Paul seems to be replying to questions that the Corinthians have asked about Christian marriage. Immediately after, Paul gives instructions as to how to put right the problems the church has been having with disorderly worship.

Now we must look at the text more closely, perhaps marking it as we go. 'Now about' (v. 1) suggests that Paul is answering another of the church's questions. This time it is about food sacrificed to idols. Paul moves into what we might think is a digression about 'knowledge' (vv. 2 and 3). I am not saying much about that here but if I were to do so, I would look up the word 'knowledge' in an analytical concordance (*Strong's* or *Young's*) and see if Paul used the original word translated 'knowledge' anywhere else (*Young's* gives a transliteration of the word so we can read the Biblical word in English script, *Strong's* gives each word a number which helps us along the way). The Greek word translated 'knowledge' here is *gnosis* from which we get a number of English words including 'agnostic'. Paul uses *gnosis* 10 times in this letter and five times in this chapter. Paul also uses the word six times in the second Corinthian letter (compared with only three times in Romans), so it appears to be an issue at Corinth. However, the main point of these few verses is that Christians are not to talk about superior knowledge but to show superior love.

Paul admits that the previous verses have been something of an interruption and continues by restating the main theme in v. 4. For Christians living in the Greek context it was easier to understand that an idol had no ontological reality – that is you could see it but it was not God, or even 'a god'. My little moose here is an illustration of this point – what you see is a small, furry moose, but I know that he is the god, *Abnaki.* This would be more challenging to the oriental mind that would more readily perceive a visible idol has having an ontological identity – to whom it would be harder to say, 'the idol (that you can see) does not exist' and perhaps even more challenging to say, at the same time, 'but the God you cannot see does exist.' Paul acknowledges that there is one God – the creator. He cannot resist attributing creative Lordship also to Jesus Christ. This is part of his case that idols have no ontological reality but he concedes that not everyone is so enlightened not least because they are accustomed to thinking that idols have an identity and shaking off that idea might be more difficult. We should also remember that while Paul fervently believes that there is only one God he also acknowledges the personality and reality of Satan and the demonic.

At verses 7-11 we are at the heart of the text. There seem to be two issues. The first is the rightness or otherwise of being able to eat meat that has been involved in idolatry. The second is Christian A's responsibility to people, such as Christian B, who feel that meat offered to an idol

has been tainted by idol worship, even though Christian A knows that it cannot have been tainted because the idol (which might have tainted it) has no ontological existence. I would say that the main issue is not, in fact, whether a Christian ought to be free to eat meat offered to idols but how Christians exercise their freedom in a way that respects the sensitivities of others.

If we are giving a basic or introductory sermon or study in an area where we are comfortable and sure-footed we might be able to pass quickly over this next section but, more often than not, this is the stage at which I would consult at least two Bible commentaries. I do that because I think that will either confirm the direction that I am taking or, if I am going in another direction completely, cause me to question it seriously. I have been preparing this working through the process, trying to tell you what I would normally do and doing it along the way – it's a bit painstaking for me as Friday morning at my desk with HELP in big letters on the computer monitor has given way to Friday afternoon. Happily, I am at the commentary stage now.

The problem with the one volume commentaries is that they often do not have the space to give more detailed answers to the questions that someone preparing a sermon or a study might want to ask. They are useful but we must be reasonable in our expectations of what they can include. For me, two of the best series of books are *Tyndale Bible Commentaries* (now available on the whole Bible on CD-rom) and *the Bible Speaks Today* (New Testament volumes available on CD-rom), both published by IVP, – *Tyndale* in a new edition for 2009. These are moderately priced, sound in scholarship, evangelical in emphasis and the kind of books any Christian with the capability of doing A-levels ought to be using. However, some years ago I managed to get a cheap CD-rom of Frank Gaebelein's, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, and I have since supplemented that with a CD-rom of the *NIV Application Commentary* and I find that these give me some very welcome help both to dig in the text and to think about how a passage can be applied. As today we are in the New Testament, I turned first to my computer resources to see what help they could give.

The writer on 1 Corinthians in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* is Harold Mare who introduces his work on 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 by saying,

> This section focuses on the next question the delegation from Corinth put to Paul: "What about eating food offered in heathen sacrifices to idols?" Paul's answer leads to a discussion of the larger question of how a believer should use his Christian liberty. Paul lays down the principle that love for one's brother in Christ should be the motivating factor in contemplating one's Christian liberty (8:1-13).

That's reassuring because it sounds as if I am already on the right track. Harold Mare tells me that 'the meat offered on the pagan altars was usually divided into three portions: one portion was burned up, a second given to the priest, and the third returned to the one making the offering. If the priest did not use his portion, it was taken to the meat market'. This is useful background material. Harold Mare also notes that though 'Christians today do not have to deal with this particular problem, they too must face questions of how to conduct themselves in a non-Christian

society'. Harold Mare's commentary on vv. 1-6 follows the same lines that I have been able to follow on my own. Reading this is not time wasted as it encourages me to think that I am thinking on the same lines as one of the world's premier Bible scholars.

In the next section, Harold Mare gets to the part that I know is the heart of the matter (vv. 7-13). He calls it *Freedom to be exercised with care.* I like the title but I have to remember to speak about the text of the scriptures and not a title, whether the title is a paragraph heading in the Bible, a title I have borrowed from somewhere else, a title that I have been given or, most tempting of all, one that I am pleased to have made up myself. In his commentary on vv. 7-13, Harold Mare also gives me a new phrase, 'moral awareness'. Those who have been saved from a life of idolatry easily associate the meat from the altar with worshipping at the altar and because they do that their conscience is defiled. For a Christian, eating meat, even Aphrodite burgers, is of no spiritual importance but Christians do not have to demonstrate spiritual liberty by eating sacrificial meat, just to prove the point to those for whom it is a problem. Christians have the 'authority' to do that but they must 'be careful'.

We should not miss the point that Paul seems to move on from meat sold at the meat market, which might have been used in idolatrous sacrifice, to a consideration of eating in the idol's temple. The logic of Christian A is that, even in the temple, in reality there is no idol to be worshipped and that therefore 'meat is meat' but for Christian B this is a real issue and damaging to faith. Christian A might be the stronger brother but he must have concern for Christian B and those who think like Christian B, quite a large group in Corinth – which, in many ways, is not surprising. Paul ends this passage by referring to his own example. He refrained from eating meat offered to idols not in weakness but in strength and showing care and responsibility to others.

Not surprisingly, Craig Blomberg's volume on 1 Corinthians in the *NIV Application Commentary* emphasises application. It's always a temptation to rush headlong into application but often that just gives us the opportunity to speak ourselves (often our own blinkered prejudices) instead of allowing the Word of God to speak through us by our faithful exegesis, exposition and application of the text, God's anointing of our ministry and the Holy Spirit working in the heart and life of those who are listening. In short, we must never neglect addressing three questions: What does the Bible say? What does the Bible mean? What does the Bible mean to me/us today? When we do that we might find that the dangerous parts of the Bible are not the passages that we don't understand but the passages that we understand perfectly well and are challenged to apply.

Craig Blomberg reminds us that the issue under discussion here would have been very important to poorer members of the church at Corinth because they could well have been accustomed to eat meat in the temple rituals or to buy the meat cheaply at the market. He sums up the passage by pointing out that Paul teaches that there is freedom in principle to eat meat from the market when there are no inherently anti-Christian implications involved, but voluntary abstention when other Christians might be damaged by a believer's exercise of freedom. This seems to be the two-pronged solution to the problem –freedom in principle but voluntary abstention when other

Christians might be damaged by the exercise of freedom. In chapters 9 and 10 Paul will explore how this applies to behaving in ways most likely to lead to the salvation of others.

Many of us like things in black and white and the temptation to do that is often with us. There is also the challenge of dealing with those who don't seem to worry too much about anything and those who are over-scrupulous ('the professional weaker brother', Blomberg). This can be expressed individually or in groups. Syncretism (mixing various religious beliefs and practices) and separatism (being out of the world whether in an enclosed environment or sub-set of society) are the two extremes but the Christian is called to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). This passage helps us to deal with the grey areas of Christian living. On the one hand, we must be wary of those (libertines) who feel that expressing their freedom in Christ is all that matters – clearly it is not all that matters. On the other hand, we must be wary of those (legalists) who would impose rules and regulations for every situation and circumstance – that is just breeding a new generation of Pharisees. Today's church can easily be divided between licentiousness and legalism. While some churches tolerate a wide variety of standards and behaviour, other churches are very strict on matters that are not even mentioned in the Bible. Responsible choice has to be made on a case-by-case basis.

The question I want to ask at this stage is whether I can find a manageable and memorable structure that will form a framework for my sermon or study. It is important that the framework comes from the text. For me, this is often the hardest part of the process and yet I think this is a significant stage, otherwise the work done so far will become a 'plate of spaghetti' – it does you good at the time, but it is hard to unravel and rather forgettable. What is the passage about? It is about having the right approach to Christian freedom, a freedom which is different from the way it might be exercised in the world at large. The Apostle Paul would have known the danger of Christian discipleship simply degenerating into an abundance of regulations. Yet no Christian at Corinth could live in isolation from others, either in the church or in the world. So my attempt at a structure to sum up this passage is: I Not rights; II Not rules, III But responsibilities.

Most preachers want to begin with an illustration that captures the imagination of the listeners – this can be topical, insightful, humorous or perhaps a combination of one or more of these. The popular television series *You are what you eat* is a possible starting point. As believers we are clearly not what we eat. Perhaps, "You're not what you eat" is a place to begin. When I lived in Surrey, bereaved families would often give me flowers from the funeral service to take to the church – these were welcome on a Friday but not much use on a Monday. The first time I took home a huge bouquet of flowers for my wife she was very touched by my thoughtfulness. She was not so sure when she learned that they were 'flowers with a history' but she soon accepted that flowers were flowers and that she might as well enjoy them as the alternative was to leave them at the crematorium. I sometimes shared 'flowers with a history' with people whom I knew would simply accept them as flowers but I did not take them to other bereaved people, or to people who were critically ill. Perhaps 'flowers with a history' is the place to begin.

The last challenge is how to end – particularly as the ending is often the part where we want to press a particular application. In the scripture passage the problem at Corinth concerned the consumption of *Aphrodite Burgers*. Poorer people at Corinth would have been glad of this meat

but it was 'meat with a history'. Eating this meat was not morally wrong but the passage encourages the Christian community to focus neither on their rights, nor on rules but on responsibilities. As the problem at Corinth concerned eating, several generations of Christians have used this passage to condemn drinking alcohol. I think, especially with the prevalence of alcohol abuse and the obvious damage it is doing to our society, that Christians should review their whole attitude to alcoholic drink, which is, after all, a psycho-active depressant drug. The contention that Jesus drank wine (probably not all that potent and diluted) is scarcely a justification for consuming alcoholic drinks that boast of their strength and distilled spirits that were unknown in New Testament times. A century or more ago, the *Band of Hope* and Temperance Movement would have made a good sermon from this passage – but would 'signing the pledge' have been a faithful application of the scriptures?

While we are unlikely to be offered *Aphrodite Burgers* for lunch, we do have to wrestle with problems that are not specifically addressed in the New Testament. Let me present some to you:

A Hindu friend has invited you to her wedding and reception. A Roman Catholic friend has died and you are invited to the Requiem Mass. A Christian friend who was brought up as a Jew is coming to a church lunch but finds it hard to see Christians eating ham sandwiches. A Muslim friend who is very interested in Christianity cannot understand how Christians can drink fortified wine at communion. A homosexual relative has invited you to his civil partnership ceremony. A lesbian workmate and her partner have invited you to their child's 'Christening'. A new Christian is concerned about working as a cashier in a betting shop. Christian parents are asking for advice about their daughter working as a barmaid. A group of young Christians wonder whether it is right to go to a film in which they know the Lord's name is going to be profaned. An older Christian man finds it hard sitting in church behind a row of young girls who are dressed immodestly. A Muslim convert cannot understand how Christians can put their Bibles on the floor or rest coffee cups on top of them.

The era of the three-day week and the power-cuts in 1974 saw the beginning of professional Sunday football in England, which is now taken for granted. Happily, there is not much Sunday football at Plymouth Argyle where for several years I have had a season ticket, having been a lifelong supporter. While it is not exactly analogous to the *Aphrodite Burgers,* Christians are faced with the challenge as to whether it is appropriate to attend football matches on Sundays. It did not seem a problem when the occasional games were on Sunday afternoons but in March 2007 the F.A. Cup sixth round fixture, Plymouth Argyle v. Watford was scheduled for 6.00 pm, which ruled out attendance at any Sunday evening service – making choosing where to be inevitable not only for my members but for me, as one of my colleagues kindly offered to deputise for me at my evening service. Did a believer have the right to go? Were we tempted in some way to have rules and regulations – that either permitted us to go or prohibited us from going (which probably all depended on the person writing them up)? What would going or not going say to our fellow-Christians, those in the evening service and those to whom we were witnessing? There could only be one answer. We had to weigh the situation and remember that as we came to a decision we had to think – not rights, not rules but responsibilities.

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