

Necessary Heresies Pentecost 13 – 11th September 2011

Reading:

Romans 14: 1-10

Have you noticed? We've not seen a good heresy trial in the Uniting Church yet. And the more unkind critics amongst us might claim that it is because in the Uniting Church you can believe anything, a view I consider patently absurd! Absurd because all Uniting Church members have a passion for Jesus the Christ and what he lived and died for, and the centrality of Christ is what keeps such a diverse group as the UCA in order. And it is a Christ-like miracle that we have had no heresy trial given the issues we have tackled in the 34 years of our existence. Issues of baptism, women in ministry, sexual orientation, inter-faith connections and social justice issues generally are all guaranteed to have members adopting different positions, sometimes holding such views passionately. But by and large we have chosen to live with difference so that the oneness of the body of Christ is retained.

But it is not always that way. One of my favourite books is one simply called, "Necessary Heresies" written by the Scottish Presbyterian minister, Peter Cameron, who was charged with heresy by the Presbyterian Church whilst working in Australia, because of a number of complaints brought against him. It's a favourite book of mine because I share most of the so called "necessary heresies."

Dr. Cameron rails against bibliolatry, legalism, possessing God, persecution of women in ministry in a book that is subtitled "Alternatives to Fundamentalism."

But some denominations take right thinking and belief seriously and are likely to get rid of those who deviate from orthodoxy. Take for instance the rebel Catholic priest from Queensland, another Peter, Kennedy this time, who was turned out of his parish for amongst other things, proclaiming a general absolution of parishioners each Sunday, something that happens here also every Sunday as a blessing. He also opened the table of the Lord to gay people, and for these sins of inclusion he was asked to give up his parish.

And for me an even sadder example of institutional bullying can be found when a group of Lutheran pastors in the US joined with leaders of other faiths, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, in conducting a 9-11 worship service in the college chapel at the Valparaiso University and so proclaimed their oneness under God, whilst commemorating the atrocity of 9/11. Sadly these pastors were made to repent of their error and to say *"we are deeply sorry... we neither believe nor teach that there are many paths to God, or that Christianity is just one way among many, or that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are essentially the same..."*

Such is the power of some institutions.

So let us consider what Paul counsels in our epistle reading this morning. Paul wades into controversy. Some members of the early church believed very firmly that they should not eat meat. The issue was not vegetarianism in the interest of animals, but fear that meat

might be contaminated since much of what was for sale would have been slaughtered by cult personnel belonging to pagan temples. One might imagine that converts from paganism to Judaism would have seen this as fundamental to their new Christian identity. They would have seen it as impossible to contemplate eating meat. Many would feel very strongly and Paul implies that some would have condemned those who did eat meat. "We cannot tolerate being in a church where meat eating is tolerated", we might hear them saying. It would recall the intensity with which some issues are debated today. The issues today are different but the attitudes remain the same.

Ironically however, just as serious would have been those who looked down their noses at those who abstained. Even Paul's designation of them as "weak" would probably not have been seen as complimentary. "They are like fundamentalists, stuck in literalism, unwilling to see beyond the surface of things", I can hear them saying. But you know, abusive and judgmental statements can be so destructive of community. Paul obviously sides with the "strong", who were probably radical Christian Jews like himself, but he is not willing to take a divisive stance towards "the weak".

He wants both groups to accept their differences and live with difference in dignity. This was a big ask in his day as it is in ours.

And just as in our day where we have many issues that seem to divide us, so it was in Paul's. There were also disputes about "days." This may well have included Jewish feast days and perhaps even the sabbath. Paul has made it clear elsewhere that for him what day we put aside to worship was a non-issue. He would hold with many of his times, that the day and even the place were unimportant in choosing when and how you worshipped. Orthopraxy - doing what is right - was far more important than orthodoxy - believing what is right. It would have been very easy, then, to ridicule those who kept strict observances about these things. "They are so primitive", one might hear them say. Paul does not go down that track. He has a concern and respect for people.

So Paul shifts the focus from making a list of do's and don'ts, including those enshrined in scripture. Instead he puts Christ at the centre. Christ "rules" - to use a popular modern term. Christ is the point of unity. Paul's Christ is not standing there with a rule book ticking boxes. Rather he stands with the marks of the cross and the mind of compassion and urges the church in Rome and us to do the same. Love for people, valuing them, transcends differences on things like food and observance of days. It will even lead Paul to suggest compromise which will favour the "weak", not offending them.

Sometimes however our doctrinal disputes have been so intense that conflict and division are inevitable - even hate and alienation. The piety of such literalism is so intense that grace slips away and concrete law takes over. But just as easily those who reject such a stance can slip off the other end and lose contact with the grace which keeps open in love towards those who make themselves opponents and enemies. Paul helps us find the centre. I imagine some in Rome would have loved Paul's words; others would have no room for them. Little has changed. In following Jesus today we need to find the compassionate and humble heart that Paul displays in this reading.

Let me finish with a quote from Albert Einstein that echoes Paul's call for acceptance of difference:

"A Human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desire and to affection for only the few people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and the whole nature in its beauty."

Albert Einstein, 1954 (Letter of 1950).

So perhaps the only heresies that are necessary are those that are surrounded with humility and compassion. And then just perhaps if more of us took Paul's and Einstein's advice to heart, obscenities like 9/11 and detention centres would be things of the past as we learned to live with and appreciate difference.

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