**Sermon 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 Epiphany 5B – 4/2/24**

[**https://youtu.be/vDX7QOu\_Nt0**](https://youtu.be/vDX7QOu_Nt0)

Some people are very passionate about what they do, so passionate that they are prepared to make big sacrifices to pursue their passion. For some it is music or artistic pursuits, for others, it is family and helping others or maybe a career or business. It may be a passion to build, design, create, discover, or lead. Often it is something that gets them excited and gives them energy, enjoyment, and fulfilment. It is a vocation that they feel called to, even compelled to do.

Paul was one of those people. He had received incredible news, life-changing news, that completely transformed his life and he felt compelled to share it with others. He could not imagine not sharing it. He was so passionate about it that he gave up everything else just so that he could share this good news. The news was so important that he was prepared to place himself in dangerous situations for the sake of telling others.

Paul went to extreme lengths to make sure that he did not place any barriers in the way of the gospel. He tried in every way to respect the beliefs and customs of the people he wanted to share the good news with so that hopefully they would in turn respect him and his message.

When he was spending time with Jews, he respected their customs as he entered their homes and places of worship. He even went so far as to insist that Timothy be circumcised so that the Jews would be open to listen and hear the good news Timothy had to share with them.

There was a limit to Paul’s accommodation of people’s customs and the limit was when a custom might lead people to lose sight of the gospel. An example was when false teachers were insisting Titus had to be circumcised because they were teaching that circumcision is required to be saved. As a result, Paul insisted that Titus should not be circumcised.

The Jews had been circumcising their children for over 1000 years, but when it came to people coming to a relationship with Jesus, expecting them to be circumcised was a barrier. We too need to examine the practices that we hold dear and make sure that we have not made them into something that puts up a barrier to people hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. We need to continually examine our lifestyles, customs, cultural and worship practices to ensure that we are not making them into burdensome expectations.

Paul was also spending time with Gentiles who ate pork and had practices that no orthodox Jew would become involved in, Paul accepted and took part in their customs. Surely it would have been difficult for him to eat pork when all his life it has been drummed into him that it was an unclean food. Paul overcame his conditioning, and he used his freedom in Christ to open up the possibility of developing the kind of relationships with people that made it possible to tell them the good news.

For Paul, there was no problem with following Jewish customs one moment and Gentile customs another. There were no problems because the Gospel gave him freedom. He was no longer under the law. He did not have to keep the law but for the sake of the people to whom he was ministering sometimes he kept the law. At the same time, his freedom meant he could freely follow Gentile customs while he was with them.

Paul was clear about his faith in Christ, he was clear about the freedoms he had as a chosen and baptised child of God. This helped him to see that the Good News of Jesus Christ transcends culture.

We are constantly confronted in our rapidly changing world by customs and lifestyles that challenge us. Paul’s example reminds us to be flexible and accommodating to the cultural practices and lifestyles of other people. Different is not automatically wrong. This can be difficult for us because our sinful nature can cause us to be critical and fearful of change. Yet we need not be fearful because Christ is with us always.

Paul’s example also reminds us to have a critical look at our own cultural practices and lifestyles, because there may be things that we are holding onto that are not honouring the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Things that we assume are Christian but in reality, are merely customs and human rules.

The only obligation Paul had and the only obligation we have is an internal one to be true to what was most important. For Paul and us this means in all situations love was the most important thing. The love that Paul experienced when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. The love that we experienced every time we remember our baptism where God called us by name and confirmed to us that he loves us so much that he chose us to be his dearly beloved child even before the creation of the universe. The love that we experience every time we remember how Jesus lived, died, and was raised for us.

We have been freed by Jesus to live authentic lives based on love. They are lives of freedom where we are not bound by rules and regulations or certain expectations. Instead, they are lives where we are freed by God to be whom he has made us to be, people just like his Son, who are daily receiving His love, compassion, and mercy until it flows out of every fibre of our being.

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