

I run along the way of your commandments,
For you have set my heart free.
(Psalm 119:32)

Public Theologian Brian McLaren was questioned by a secular interviewer “*your religion doesn’t seem to keep you constantly dividing the world into us and them, in and out, good and bad. Is that legitimate or is that compromise?*” Brian responded that he understood Jesus’ teaching was to see every person as neighbour. The interviewer jokingly responded, “*what good is religion if you can’t feel superior to anybody?*”

Jokes tend to hold an essence of truth. Often that’s what makes them funny. Mostly I don’t think the Christians I know want to be known as “*those people who think they are superior,*” or as “*those people who think they are right, when others are wrong.*” Mostly I think Christians want to love their neighbour, whoever they may be. Frequently we do that. But when it comes to different perspectives in our own communities, on sexuality, on theology, on music, we can too easily forget our neighbourliness. Then, we may become ‘*conservative*’ or ‘*liberal*’ or ‘*traditional*’ or ‘*contemporary*’ or ‘*this*’ or ‘*that*’. In a way, it’s a bit like football, tribal. We all have a team and we want them to win. Why? Because they are the best, of course.

I grew up with footy, VFL then. I love the crowds, the game, the feeling of euphoria of a close match and, the disappointment of one team annihilating another. I’ve been known to say, it’s a Victorian thing, about the emotion that comes with team tribalism. Now even though some people are dangerously devoted to their team, I want to believe that mostly we put our relationships with family, friends, and even our acquaintances first, until Saturday. So, is faith really like footy, everyone’s my neighbour until we are playing each other? Possibly.

I believe the passionate Apostle Paul would say, fanatical devotion to beliefs or factions are dangerous and even, unfaithful. Beware...Beware...Beware... (Phil 3:2). That’s what he seems to be saying to the Philippians. Theologian, Robert Murray SJ, goes as far as saying, Philippians chapter 3, verses 2-11, is Paul’s ‘*Transvaluation of Values*’ through Christ. What Paul seems to be doing, once again, is prioritising being Christlike above and beyond any notions of in-group values, such as circumcision.

For Paul the highest value possible was the relationship one could have with Christ. To be Christlike was more important than any other aspect of faith, even circumcision. Now for us today circumcision may not be a divisive issue. But for Paul, it could be a sign of fanatical devotion to scriptural teaching. Devotion that in practice divided an in-group from other groups.

Now we don’t really know what those who were troubling Paul were really focused on. We only ever get one side of the story in Paul’s letters. It could have been that they were trying to help their brothers in Christ. At that time exemptions to worshipping the Imperial Roman Cult were granted to Judaism, while Christians were being persecuted. Roman rule was very strict in enforcing the demands of its Cult. So, to be circumcised was to be safe from persecution.

We also don't really know why Paul was so concerned about this issue, he was circumcised, (Phil 3:5) and his Lord Jesus was too (Luke 2:21). We also know that the Jerusalem Council made the decision that it was not necessary for Gentile Christians to be circumcised (Acts 15:1-21). Although this possibly occurred later than Paul's letter to Philippi. Anyway, what harm could different opinions on circumcision do?

For Paul the harm was not in the act of circumcision, nor in different opinions expressed, it was that he considered this argument to be undermining his whole work of extending membership of God's People on the basis of faith in Christ crucified. Paul was evangelical to the core. He had received a gift, been transformed in faith by it, and he wanted as many people as possible to share in that. What Paul knew, and we too experience, is that preferential treatment, and fanatical tribal attitudes, can cause great unrest, confusion and hurt. It can look like one group is claiming superiority over others.

Paul's values were very clear, Christlike living was first and foremost. The Christ story of humility and hope (Phil 2:6-11) was also the story Paul's life was straining for (Phil 3:2-18). Paul was adamant and tried to persuade his communities that it could also be their story (Phil 3:17-21). The fruit of living into this story, whether it brought persecution or death, was the peace of God (Phil 4:9).

I don't think Paul necessarily wanted everyone to agree with him, he valued freedom too. So, if a person was mature in faith and of the same mind (as Christ), that was highly valued. But if a person thought differently, then being attentive and receptive to God's revelation about their thinking, was also valued: As long as the priorities were right and the differently thinking person was holding fast to the life that Christ had brought forth, Paul didn't seem too bothered.

Today many people think of freedom as the maximum ability to choose whatever life they want to live. This self-determining individualism was not the freedom Paul understood. Even in his own communities, Paul's teaching on freedom was misinterpreted. Christians in Corinth concluded "*I have the right to do anything*" (1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23). Some believers in Rome even slandered Paul, claiming he taught "*Let us do evil that good may result*" (Romans 3:8; cf. 6:1, 15); these same people leaned on God's grace toward sinners saying, "*We can do anything we want, because God will forgive us.*" Paul was concerned for people who misrepresent the gospel this way: "*Their condemnation is deserved!*" (Romans 3:8): And in Galatians 5:13, Paul warns "*do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.*"

If I understand Paul correctly, freedom is one of the fruits of the gospel. These fruits, like all fruits, require attention and care. They cannot be left to go wild, without being pruned. Fruits also need to be fed, and life in Christlike community can be wholesome and healthy food. When it's not, we need to do something about it.

I once had the privilege of working alongside another Christian who had very different views to me. We got along well at work, and my training in listening helped me to hear where she was coming from and to appreciate that her faithfulness was expressed in a different way to mine. It was not harmful, it was different.

I remember visiting her church and genuinely admiring the energy and fellowship I saw there. I felt welcome and I felt energised too, but I didn't go back. She invited me a few more times before we both agreed that it wasn't the place for me.

I can tell you now what I couldn't tell her then. Even though I felt uplifted and welcome, I got a very clear sense that many other visitors would not feel that way. Now I'm sure they would have welcomed the poor, the orphan and the widow. What I was concerned with is they wouldn't welcome people who were interested in interfaith dialogue, or ecumenical endeavours. It seemed to me that for them there was only one way to be a faithful Christian, theirs.

An attitude of exclusivity, or superiority, is not the way of Christ nor of Paul. Jesus died for all, for the possibility of communion with those who were not there yet. He stood in obedience with the One he called Father, not against Judaism, but against those leaders of his time who were using the power they had for their own gain. Our call is to use the power we have to enter more fully into communion with Christ, and to share that communion life with one another, for the world. To know Christ and to make him known is to join in Paul's evangelical work of extending grace to one another, so the world may see our faith in Christ crucified and risen.

God of fruitful and abundant life, you give us the freedom to be different, one from another, and the freedom to be fruitful together, one body in peace and love. May the light you shine in us, be warmth for the world around us. Amen.

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