

*Love builds up* By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship (from Psalm 46)

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Hymn 611

1. Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

2. We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

3. I will hold the Christlight for you  
in the night time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

4. I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow,  
till we've seen this journey through.

5. When we sing to God in heaven,  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

6. Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

Prayer of Approach (adapted from *500 prayers for the Christian year* by David Clowes)

We come to pray and to praise; we come to listen to your word.  
We come together as your people, even though we may not be physically together.

For the joy of each new day which is waiting to be filled with fresh experiences of life,  
we thank you Lord.

We thank you for the hope you bring, for your assurance of life in Jesus.

And at this time of fear in our world, we thank you for the work of scientists and for our NHS staff.

Amen

Prayer of Confession

We confess that we do not always remember to thank you, that we are often self-centred and quick to blame and complain.

We confess that we often put ourselves and our own loved ones first, forgetting or ignoring the suffering of our world.

We are not always the loving, compassionate people you intended us to be.

So we come before you to ask for your forgiveness and for the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to transform us.

And we thank you for your gracious acceptance of us with all our faults and weaknesses.  
To all who turn to Christ, he says, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Amen

### Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your Kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.  
Now and for ever. Amen

### Reading: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (NRSV)

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup> but anyone who loves God is known by him.

<sup>4</sup> Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup> Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—<sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

<sup>7</sup> It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup> “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup> But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup> So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup> But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

### Reflection

For about nine years, in my twenties and thirties, I lived in Southall, a town just to the west of London, not far from Heathrow Airport. Southall was and is well known for its cultural mix. When I lived there, the majority of the population were Punjabi Sikhs, but there were also many Hindus, both Indian and Gujarati, quite a few Muslims, a large African-Caribbean population and a small number of white British people. Having grown up in a suburb of Derby, I found my new home town vibrant and exciting. There were foods and spices, which to me, were unknown, exotic and thrilling, endless fabric shops full of gorgeous bright silks and I was always surrounded by the sound of mysterious eastern languages.

When I read about ancient Corinth, I was reminded of Southall. Corinth was also very mixed, culturally and religiously. It was a Greek city where, originally, the ancient Greek gods and goddesses had been worshipped – Apollo, Zeus, Aphrodite and many others. Then in 146BC, Corinth was conquered by the Romans, who set up their own temples for worship of their Emperors. By the time a small Christian community had appeared in the First Century AD, the Egyptian Cult of Isis had been added to this mix, as had the Cult of Mithras, which remains of unknown origin. There was also a small Jewish community.

It was therefore to Christians living in a very mixed religious and cultural environment that Paul wrote his letters. Inevitably, such an environment threw up a number of awkward ethical issues for the small, but growing, Christian

community and it is one of these issues, the matter of eating food sacrificed to idols, that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.

One of the practices in both Greek and Roman temples was the sacrifice of animals to idols. Idols were images, usually in the form of statues, of the various gods and goddesses worshipped in the city. Once the animals had been killed in front of the idol, the meat was eaten at a feast by the worshippers, but there was usually some left over and this was sold in the city's marketplaces, where it was available for Christians to buy.

Was it wrong for Christians to eat such meat? Well, as verse 4 tells us:

*'we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one."'*

Therefore idols were meaningless, they did not truly represent any god, goddess or emperor, so there was no reason to believe that the meat was any different to that which had not been sacrificed. Indeed it made absolutely no difference to a Christian's standing before God whether he or she ate such meat or not.

However, Paul pointed out that there were some Christians, probably those quite new to the faith, who felt uncomfortable about the meat, because they feared that eating it meant that they were effectively taking part in an aspect of idol worship.

As he writes in verse 7:

*'they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.'*

How then, were more mature Christians to respond when confronted with a rather delicious looking cut of meat as they strolled around Corinth's marketplace? We might assume that they would take the opportunity to lovingly share their greater knowledge with their newer brothers and sisters. But this is not what Paul urges. He suggested that for mature Christians to exercise their freedom to eat the meat could create a *"stumbling block to the weak."* The newer Christians might emulate them, eat the meat, but then feel uncomfortable and defiled.

They would have done something, under pressure, which they believed to be a sin, and thus stumble and fall in their faith.

In fact though, it is the mature Christian who would be guilty in such a case, as is clear from verse 11:

*'So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.'*

The consequences would be dire and serious for the *whole* Christian community, as verse 12 makes clear:

*'But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.'*

The reason for this is clear from the previous verse: Christ died for these brothers and sisters. Would those more mature Christians want to inflict even the most trivial harm on those whose lives Jesus has saved?

This is all very interesting historically, but is there anything helpful here for the modern Christian? We certainly cannot lift Paul's words and apply them *directly* to our circumstances, but I suggest there are lessons for us in this passage.

Those of us who have been Christians for a number of years, even for all our lives, will sometimes have the delightful experience of meeting a person new in the faith, with that fresh-faced excitement and a desire to learn and grow. We may well envy them the novelty of faith and the thrilling hunger for knowledge and experience yet to be gained. We will also encounter those who do not know Jesus and to whom we want to reach out and with whom we wish to share our faith.

Yet many people have absorbed assumptions about Christianity and Christians, for example, some may believe that a "real" Christian would not, or would not be "allowed to" watch particular kinds of television programmes or laugh at certain kinds of jokes. They may believe that Christians should never show annoyance, irritation or anger.

Alternatively, some people may have their own strong moral code, believing, for example, that it is immoral to drink alcohol, to smoke or to eat meat. There are, of course, sensible reasons for exercising moderation or abstinence in some such activities, but, as Paul tells us,

*'We are no worse off if we do not (do these things), and no better off if we do.'*

Of course it would be appropriate to explain that Christian anger is sometimes justified and necessary; however, why would we insist on our freedom to do *everything* we are entitled to do if it might create a stumbling block for our new or potential sisters and brothers?

There is another group we might choose to consider. Christianity has been around for about 2000 years and many different traditions and denominations have developed. Here is an example of one of them: my husband and I visited the beautiful Isle of Harris some years ago, where the Christian community is extremely devout. The Sabbath is observed strictly and it was considered completely unacceptable to, for example, hang one's washing out to dry on a

Sunday. As we were staying in a holiday cottage, this caused some frustration if Sunday was the only dry day in the week! We could have insisted on doing what we believed was perfectly allowable, but how kind would this have been to the local people? Alcohol was also deeply frowned upon and indeed very difficult to find in the local shops. Would it have been loving to enjoy a beer in full view of the islanders?

Whatever the situation or beliefs of those we encounter, the crucial phrase here is found in verse 1 of our reading:

*'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.'*

What should matter more? Demonstrating what we consider to be our superior knowledge of the Christian faith or showing love for our brothers and sisters, however inconvenient or unpalatable that might be? The Greek word translated as "stumbling block" is "*proskomma*," (v.9) which, when used literally, means "a stone on a path, an obstacle." When encountered, it would trip up a walker or runner, causing them to fall heavily, face first onto a stony, dirty footpath, most likely with painful injuries. Similarly, "wound" is translated from "*typto*" which means "to strike vigorous blows" – the kind of beating one might receive in a vicious pub brawl.

A major defining characteristic of Christians is that we love one another, as Jesus commands in his words recorded in John's Gospel (13:34):

*'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'*

Would any one of us want to place a stone on our sisters' and brothers' spiritual paths or give them a thorough spiritual beating just so that we can enjoy our "rights" and our "freedom?" Of course we wouldn't!

The verses we have considered in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians show us one way that we can demonstrate this love. As with many Bible passages, we need to adapt the general principles to our modern 21<sup>st</sup> Century lives, but how rewarding to know that, rather than tripping up and harming our brothers and sisters, we can walk beside them, steering them away from those cruel stumbling blocks and guide them on the path to Christian maturity.

### Prayers of Intercession

Lord we approach you with all our fears and helplessness to pray for our suffering world.

We remember with sorrow the families who have lost loved ones to Covid during the past year, as well as those who are suffering the frightening symptoms today. Please let your comforting love flow over these ones. We pray for health workers throughout the world. Please sustain and strengthen them in their exhaustion and bless their caring work. We are mindful too of those who are sick with cancer, heart problems and other illnesses, who need medical care but may be fearful of hospitals no longer having the capacity to help them.

We acknowledge that we live a rich country but are aware of poverty around us and throughout the world, the homeless who are cold, fearful and unable to protect themselves from this virus. We pray for them and for the charities which reach out to them.

We look with despair on the conflicts throughout the world, but we trust that your love will reach out to all who turn to you for comfort and peace. We pray that the unrest in the USA will soon be over and will not have the far reaching impact that many might fear.

And we pray for ourselves, for our circuit, for our towns. We ask for your comfort for the elderly, the sick, the clinically vulnerable and those whose mental health is affected at this time.

Lord, may we leave all our cares and fears with you, offering this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

### Hymn 242

A new commandment I give unto you,  
That you love one another as I have loved you,  
That you love one another as I have loved you.

By this the world shall know that you are my disciples,  
if you have love one for another.  
By this the world shall know that you are my disciples,  
if you have love one for another.

### Blessing (adapted from a prayer on [www.faithandworship.com](http://www.faithandworship.com))

As we take our worship, praise and prayer into our daily lives, may we be sustained through the love of our Heavenly Father. May we feel the presence of the Son walking beside us, and know the power of the Spirit in both our actions and our words.

Amen