

Epiphany Four

February 1, 2009

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen

How many of you watched the inauguration??

As an Episcopalian, I naturally love all the pomp and circumstance:

The prayer service at St. John's Lafayette Square, coffee at the White House with the outgoing and incoming President, parades, inaugural balls...and best of all a peaceful transfer of power.

When you read the headlines from around the world...that peaceful transition is something as Americans we can really take for granted.....

Of course, this inauguration had its own share of controversies. Was the music on taped or live??? I remember thinking Yo-Yo Ma sounded almost too good in the 20 degree weather...turns out I was right....

And tell me what was going on with Aretha Franklin's hat.....she looked like a demented Christmas present (of course, after I preached last night a parishioner came up and told me that the Smithsonian had asked for the hat, so much for my fashion sense)

And finally for gosh sakes can't the Chief Justice get the oath right....if I were Roberts I would have practiced the night before.....

One of the more interesting stories from the inauguration concerned the congressional luncheonDid you hear about the special menu.....It was comprised of food that President Lincoln enjoyed:

Seafood stew, a main course of duck and pheasant served with sour cherry chutney and molasses sweet potatoes, and a dessert of apple cinnamon sponge cake....

Boy, I am hungry just talking about it....this Lincoln menu did pique my curiosity about other presidential food facts and I thought it would be fun to share a few with you this today....

Guess which President made July National Ice Cream Month: Ronald Reagan.

FDR according to his housekeeper loved scrambled eggs, fish chowder, and hot dogs. (Hopefully not all at once)

President Roosevelt was also fond of an unpopular and much maligned dessert. Any guesses....yes, you got it FDR loved Fruitcake.

For those of you who like something more obscure...guess that loved squirrel soup...James Garfield. Which might explain why you don't hear much about him anymore....

And most of us probably remember the great controversy which surrounded the First George Bush disdain for broccoli....

and just so you leave my sermon up to date on our current President.....Barack does not like beets.....

By now I imagine you are thinking about all that Super Bowl party food you are planning to eat this afternoon.....

And food is on my mind this morning as well, but for a slightly different reason....I have been reflecting on an important biblical topic: food and table fellowship....

We hear a little about food this morning in our lesson from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians.

Paul writes, *“Now concerning food sacrificed to idols; we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge, but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists” and there is no God but one.”*

The concern that St Paul’s expresses in his epistle gives us insight into a world that has largely passed from our consciousness.

When we go to Publix or Kroger, we don’t have to worry about whether the steak or the chicken wings once sat on a altar dedicated to the god Zeus.

In the ancient world though, it was not uncommon for the meat found in the local markets to have come from a pagan temple. Some temples in Corinth even had dining rooms for their worshipers to eat in following the sacrifices.

It makes practical sense, you wouldn’t want to throw the food away....and eating together was an important part of worship...the ancients saw a clear connection between offering thanks to their gods and sharing fellowship with each other around a table.....

Worship for them (as well as us today) was a communal event.....

In fact, a person was often judged by the company he kept especially around the dinner table.

Jesus as you will recall was roundly criticized for eating with tax collectors, prostitutes and other so called sinners.

In his letter, St. Paul is also dealing with new Christians from non-Jewish backgrounds.

Folks new to the faith did not think it mattered if they met friends at Zeus’ temple for a meal and also worshipped with their new Christian community.

This practice gave rise to another concern for Paul. He worried their fervent belief in Jesus could harm the feelings or faith of another....

As he puts it, but take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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.

St. Paul sees knowledge as useful to have (everyone knows as he says a pagan idol has no life and is a false god) but knowledge can in some cases be harmful to the building up of community....

His perspective can be a bit difficult to grasp since our age values individual action and the acquisition of information...

For Paul building community is based on actions that relate one member of the group to the "other". We do or do not do certain things or make certain choices, based on the way it potentially impacts other members of our community.

This type of ethic is far removed from most current thinking and I suppose that it does have the danger of being used as an argument for not taking action when confronted by evil, prejudice or hate...

In Britain prior to WW II, you heard this kind of argument when some intellectuals made apologies for the violence of the Nazi regime....saying that violence was in the German make up...and the country needed a strong hand like Hitler to bring order and discipline....we know how wrong they were...

But I think that kind of reasoning is distorting what Paul is writing about....Paul is not addressing issues of societal injustice or cruelty...in

other places in the letter he does not shy away from condemning bad behavior.....

In this particular case though, he is dealing with the way that Christians are called to treat each other when they live together in community.

As a community of baptized believers, a community centered in Christ, founded upon the redemptive power of the resurrected Lord. Christians are called to build up their church communities.

This is why he makes the point that while they all possess knowledge of the one true Lord, this knowledge can give rise to a certain spiritual arrogance that harms community life. In his words he writes, It can puff them up.

For Paul it is love, charity, agape....that is the glue that binds community together and this is what he emphasizes in his message to the Corinthians. And it is a message that all Christian churches still need to hear today.

It is probably unfortunate that he uses the words “strong” and “weak” to characterize the different groups in Corinth....because these words and labels have negative connotations attached to them for many of us.

But if we pressed the point, I think St. Paul would remind his readers that even Christ who taught and spoke with great authority did not see his strength as something that showed everyone else up

Jesus supreme example for us to follow he gave on the first Maundy Thursday....if you want to imitate his example...his authority and power....you must be willing to wash another person’s feet....

Particularly in an age that still insists on using labels to describe various types of Christian believers.....they are evangelical, conservative, liberal,

devout, or even broccoli loving Christians.....these types of labels are not helpful for Christians intent on building up the church.....

And what ultimately matters is not the food we are eating or the labels we give each other but the commitment that we have to each others spiritual well being....this is the point that Paul is trying to make....

Our life as members of St. Martin's church is not a contest...but a journey we are all on together...and as Paul says in the same letter...no part can say to the other...they are not needed....or they are not important.....

Deference for St. Paul is not a cop out to another's prejudices but a belief that each of us has value...and ultimately our value as Christians in God's eyes is measured in the way we treat one other.....

This is the standard that Paul uses to encourage the building up of the Corinthian community.....and that should be our standard as well...

it doesn't matter if you like beets, or even if you happen to love fruitcake.....

What matters is the call we have in this place to be each others servants....to build up the church....and to share the good news of God's redemption and freedom that has been entrusted to all of our care.....