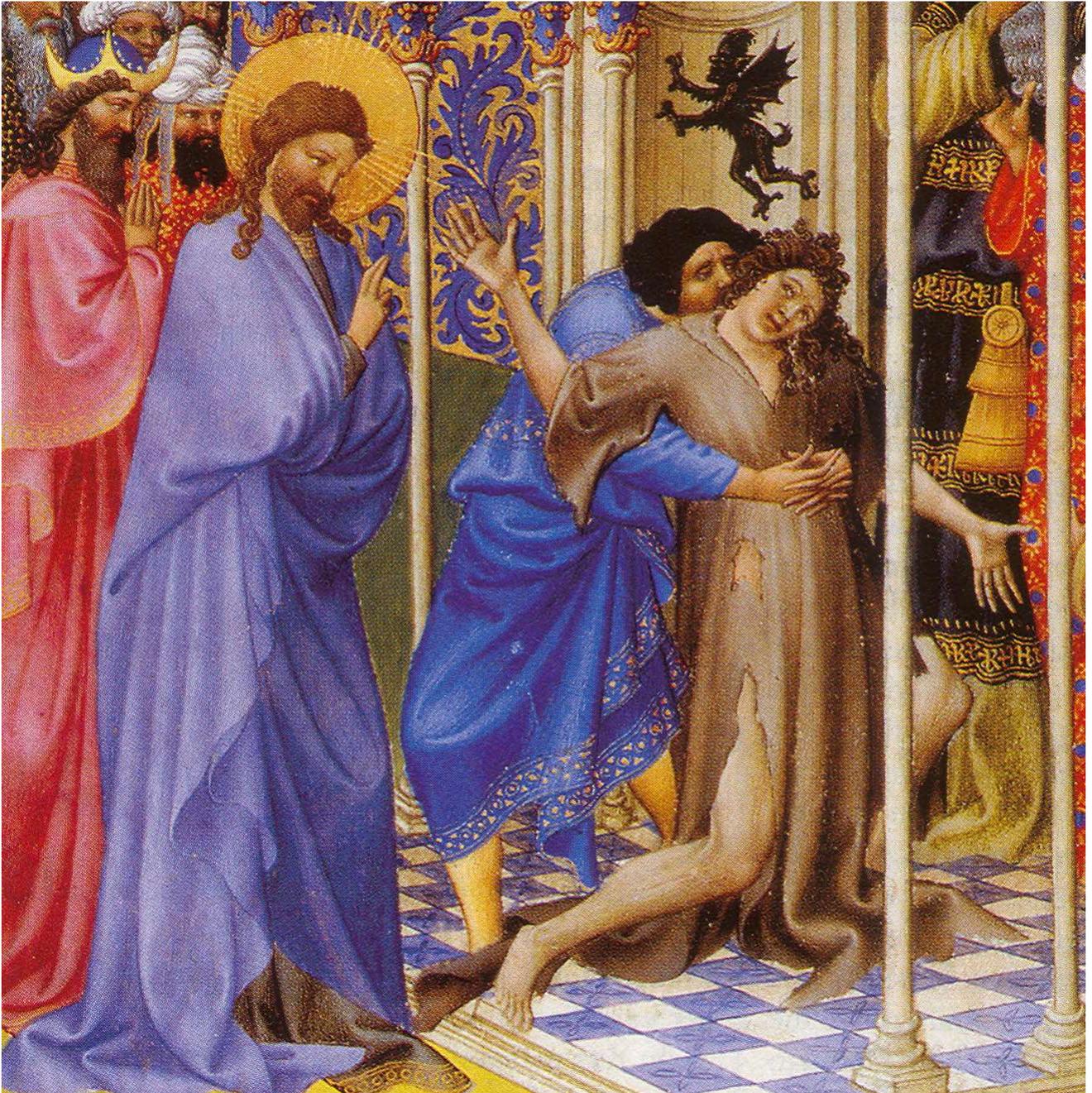


ORMOND UNITING CHURCH

EPIPHANY 4

31st January



Jesus heals the man with an unclean spirit.

Très Riches Heures – Duc de Berry

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.*

Psalm 111

Prayer

Loving God,
Your beloved Son Jesus came among us to free us
from all that binds us and keeps us from you.
Speak your word of liberation and peace to us,
That we may be free to praise, serve
And enjoy you all our days.

Grant us your wisdom,
Free our hearts and tongues to praise you,
Bestow us with your peace.

In the name of him who calls us into the joy of your reign,
Jesus our beloved brother. Amen

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord!
I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.
Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.
He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

1 Corinthians 8. 1-13

The Christians in Corinth have written to Paul asking him about whether it is acceptable to eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols. This is a complex passage and Nathan Nettleton, a Hebrew scholar and pastor of Sth Yarra Baptist Church, offers us this translation of the passage. This is what Paul has to say.

Let us now look at your question about food that has been sacrificed to idols in the pagan temples. You ask whether it is okay for Christians to eat at meals where such food is served. What you have said is true:

“superior knowledge dispels superstition.”

But it is also true that superior knowledge can swell your head; while love will clear your head and underpin sound moral judgment. Anyone who claims that their superior knowledge enables them to make their own moral decisions without worrying about anyone else is just proving how little they really know. By contrast, those who love God and seek to express that love in all they do, are truly in-the-know with God.

So, what does knowledge have to say about whether or not it is okay to eat food that has been offered to idols? Plenty! We enlightened people know that *“idols are actually nothing,”* and we know that *“there is only one true God.”* No matter how many so-called gods and lords there may be in the world — and there are certainly any number of things to which people devote themselves — we know better. We know that the one and only God is the Father, who brought all things into being and for whom we exist. And we know that the one and only Lord is Jesus the Messiah, through whom all things were brought into being, and through whom we exist.

However, not everyone is up to speed on all this. Some people who, until recently, have been involved in the worship of idols, are not so easily able to make the separation in their heads between the food and the worship of the idols. Their moral warning lights go off more easily, and so if they go ahead and eat the food, they feel defiled by it and wracked with guilt. You can depend on this saying:

“We won’t get into God’s good books for what we eat.”

No one loses anything by abstaining from such food, and no one gains any special benefits from eating it. But — and this is a big *but* for those of you who feel free to eat it — unless you are very careful, this precious freedom of yours could turn into a minefield for those who are more morally timid. Because of your superior knowledge, you feel free to accept invitations to banquets held at pagan temples, and that’s all very well. But what if some less certain and secure Christians see you go? Perhaps, because they look up to you, they might feel that they should disregard their moral warning lights and join you in eating food that has been offered to idols. And once they start distrusting their own warning lights, they are in trouble because they no longer know which way to turn. Your superior knowledge would then be responsible for crashing the moral integrity of a timid believer for whom Christ laid down his life. You’ve wounded them,

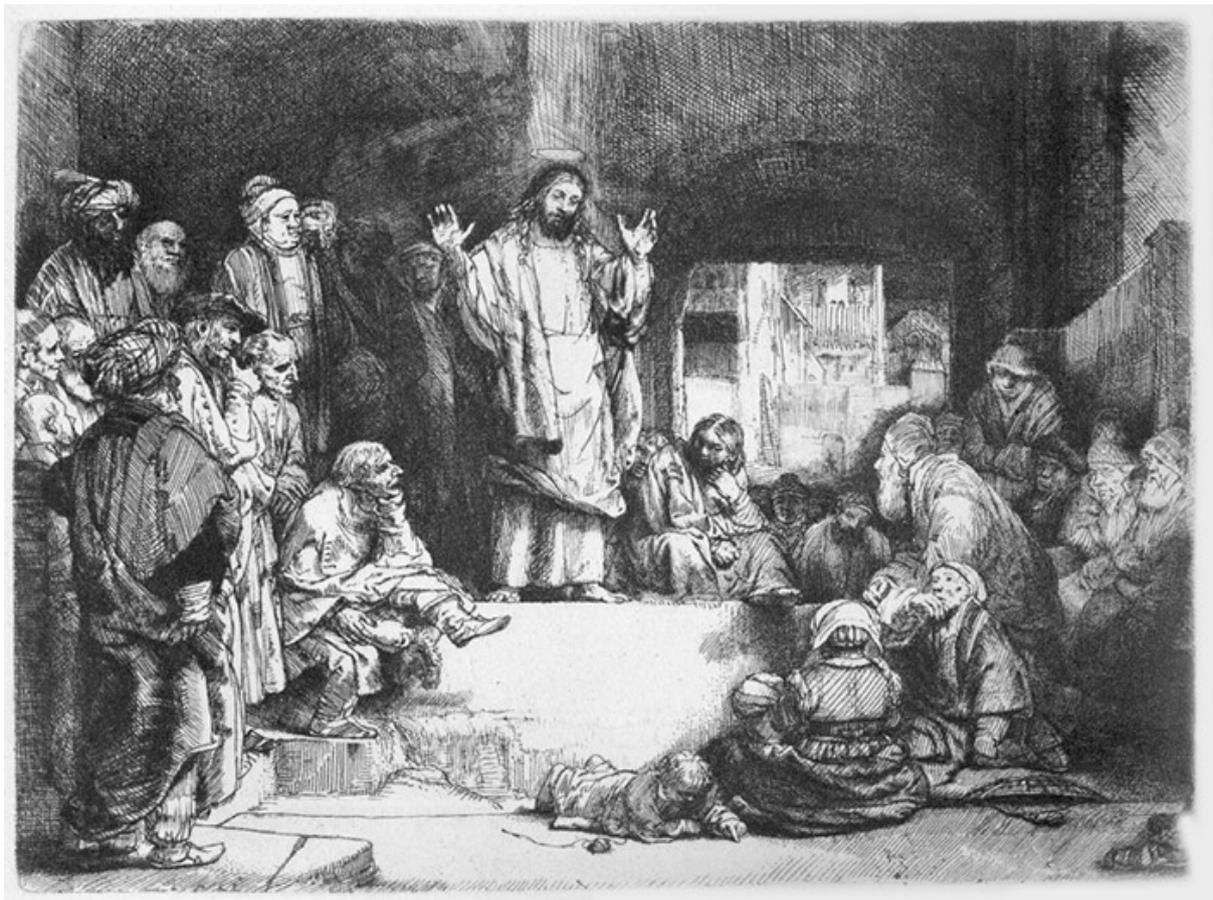
causing their fragile conscience to short-circuit. And if you dish out a kick in the guts to one who, under God, is a member of your own family, then you are kicking Christ in the guts. So, for myself, if such food could risk derailing someone, then I'd happily give up eating meat altogether in order to make sure that no one ever goes crashing off the rails because of something I did.

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The Gospel of Mark 1. 21-28

Jesus and the disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.



Jesus teaching - Rembrandt von Rijn

Reflecting

The events of this week in which we have marked Australia Day have been tumultuous. In the days before the announcement of the annual Australia Day awards, news of the upgrading of a past award of the Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) to the highest award of Companion (AC) to former tennis player Margaret Court was leaked to the press. A public hue and cry ensued. Court, now a Pentecostal Pastor of a Western Australian church, has repeatedly been vocal in her criticism of LGBTI people and of the marriage equality decision a few years ago.

In response to the granting of an upgrade to Court's award for services to tennis, a number of prominent Australian's have refused to receive a proposed award this year and former recipients are returning their awards. Veteran journalist Kerrie O'Brien announced this week that he would reject his proposed award. Dr Clara Tuck Meng Soo, a transgender woman who received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2016 for her work as a medical practitioner with LGBT people and those with HIV and drug dependencies this week announced she would return her award. And the day after Australia Day the Rev. Alistair Macrae, former Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and National President of the Uniting Church in Australia, announced he would also return his award.

Writing in the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald this week Alistair said: *As a minister and theologian, I am aware that bad theology kills people. Bad theology underpinned the racist apartheid regime in South Africa. Bad theology supported Hitler's racist ideology and the evil it produced.*

Bad theology underpinned or failed to recognise the racist assumptions behind the destructive program of colonisation not least in this land. Bad theology continues to alienate and oppress sexual minorities.

Statistics relating to suicide and mental health issues among the LGBTI community are well known and should be of concern to the whole community, not least the community that claims to follow the teaching and life example of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life was characterised by openness and welcome to all manner of people excluded from full participation in their communities, often on religious grounds.

In our reading of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is now moving into his public ministry. He visits a synagogue on the sabbath close to his home town of Nazareth and he teaches as one having authority, not as the scribes. As he is there, Jesus is then approached by a man who, we are told, has an unclean spirit. From the outset Mark's Gospel is characterised by a conflict between the good news being brought by Jesus and powers of oppression and alienation which characterised Jesus' religious world and which have, too often, the religious world of all times.

Strangely, the possessed man recognises Jesus: *I know who you are, the Holy One of God*, and he recognises the power which Jesus possesses to release and liberate him. It would seem that the man loiters around the synagogue, in thrall to bad theology. He is described as having an unclean spirit. This uncleanness by which he is identified is a religious status, not a medical, psychiatric or psychological condition. His "illness" as been imposed by others who have promoted themselves as having authority in matters to do with the religious purity code. He has been designated and condemned as unclean. But in this first act of Jesus' ministry, after he has called the disciples to follow him, begins the confrontation with the forces of religious oppression which hold people bound. This is a confrontation which culminates in the cross.

We can give thanks for those who continue to challenge forces of oppression and call for the release of those who are bound in body mind and spirit to forces of oppression. And we can continue to give thanks for God in Christ who continues to call us out of those things which hold us in thrall to powers of darkness and oppression.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

Prayers of the people – prepared by Marg Davis

Dear Lord, please hear us as we bring our prayers for others, and ourselves, today.

Let us pray:

We think of people around the world who are grappling with the pandemic, especially for those whose lives have been taken, those who have lost loved ones due to this frightening virus and those who are currently suffering. We give thanks for the medical professionals, the carers and the researchers, who are working tirelessly to try and alleviate the suffering. We ask that you guide politicians, and decision makers, around the world, so that they act wisely, and with consideration, for the safety and protection of all of those they represent.

In our prayers we remember those who are suffering as a result of other illnesses and a variety of conditions - sadness and sorrow, desperation, loneliness and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Grant them your peace, and love, as they face each new day.

As a new month commences and people are returning to education – both students, teachers, support staff and administrators we pray for a happy, safe and more settled year. We think of young ones as they start kinder, new classes and new schools. Help them, and their parents, and carers, as they learn and grow.

We pray for the ministry, and mission, of your worldwide church. For your church in Australia, its clergy and people and we pray for our own Ministry Team at Ormond.

We pray for the well-being of those with whom we live and work. For our families and friends and we pause to offer you our private prayer for those known to us ...

Thank you, Dear Lord, for listening to our prayers and we join together to say the prayer that Christ shared with the disciples:

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.

Save us from the time of trial *and* deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.

Amen

Blessing

May Christ the crucified and risen one,

Free you from all that binds you.

May you be made whole,

May you know God's peace,

May you be free to enjoy God all your days.

Amen

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NEWS AND NOTICES