

ON PUBLIC DUTY¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 31 January 20216

*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*²

Many of you will have been in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney. As a teacher there, I have been in that building more times than I can recall. I do remember clearly the first occasion in early 1956 when, as a 16-year-old, I started my Arts degree and had, as the custom then was, to sign the matriculation register. When my name was called, I went onto the dais and signed up to what, although I didn't know it then, was a life-time of connection with that establishment.

Architect Edmund Blackett based his design principally on Westminster Hall in London, copying its magnificent hammer beam ceiling. Each beam has an angel holding a book displaying symbols for subjects in the arts and sciences as they were in the 1850s. Over the dais, however, the angels display two biblical texts in Latin. They can be used to show how much the world has changed since then. In the first place, we can assume that everyone at the university would have been able to read the Latin text. That is sadly not true today. Second, the times assumed that everyone had at least a token commitment to Christianity or, possibly, Judaism. The texts provoked, as far as I know, no opposition. Their placement would be impossible today.

The first text says: *Timor Domini, Principium Sapientiae*³; 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. The second says: *Scientia inflat, charitas aedificat*⁴; 'Knowledge puffs up, love builds up'.

Leaving aside the language and the religion, both texts could seem to us to be out of place. They seem to give preference to the wrong things. The first suggests that fear is a virtue. The second degrades knowledge. Surely, we should rather have the opposite. We should act without fear and exalt knowledge.

In my contemplation of my life as an academic and preacher, I often have regard to a verse in Charles Wesley's hymn, "Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go".⁵ One of its verses, rarely included in hymn books, but in the *New English Hymnal* that we use, begins "Preserve me from my calling's snare".⁶ It's unclear what Wesley meant but I have interpreted it as suggesting that everybody's calling has its own particular trap.

For a teacher and a preacher, the traps may be suggested by the angels' texts in the Great Hall. In the Bible, wisdom is the ability to make thought result in appropriate action. It is not a preordained consequence of training. It is not like, for example, the application of logic in an argument. To be wise includes understanding one's place in the world, that is, it requires humility. That is why one of the texts advises fear of the Lord. This fear is not terror. It is an

¹ Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

² 1 Corinthians 8:1

³ Proverbs 9:10; also, the last verse of this morning's Psalm, 111:10

⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1

⁵ *New English Hymnal*, 235

⁶ Verse 3

acknowledgement of one's ultimate dependence. More significantly, wisdom requires that I admit that my knowledge is limited. No matter how well educated I am, I simply do not know everything. Preachers and teachers need to accept this.

The other text, found in this morning's reading from 1 Corinthians, draws a distinction between knowledge and love. As we read Paul's letter, we receive no direction that the possession of knowledge is wrong, on the contrary. What Paul is saying is that everything depends on how knowledge is used. While knowledge may be something that one has, it is not an automatic key to power over others. The well-educated often think that it is. That is to say, they become "puffed up" in their own estimation.

The antidote to such pretention is love, care and respect for the other. This is where our discussion enters the real world. Consider the events preceding the end of the term of ex-President Donald Trump. As a result of his alleged inciting of demonstrators to storm the US Capitol building, his Twitter account was blocked. Both in the USA and here, the blocking provoked a discussion about free speech. Various arguments about the right to free speech were advanced to say that the blocking should not have happened. On the other hand, the managers of Twitter rejected an obligation to carry messages inciting violence. To put the matter bluntly, you can speak as you wish, but should you? If you do, am I obliged to help you disseminate your message?

Donald Trump was apparently convinced, or knew, that his defeat in the election was the result of widespread fraud. We make similar comments about the controversy around Margaret Court's promotion in the Order of Australia. She is convinced, or knows, how God regards various types of sexuality.⁷ This brings us back to 1 Corinthians. Meat was expensive in first century Corinth. Most ordinary people ate it only on special occasions. Much of the meat for sale in the market had previously been dedicated to the local Greek deities as a form of sacrifice. Such sacrifice did not result in the destruction of the animal's flesh; it was dedicated, slain and then made available to the public.

The Christians in Corinth all knew that the deities involved did not exist. They were represented by idols but there was only one God and no idol could represent that God. So, argued some, what does it matter if I eat such meat? It has been part of an idle ceremony with no substance at all and is, in itself, completely untouched by its history. Why should I not eat it? In any case, as a gentile convert, I can hardly avoid eating it. I have a business in the city; I have pagan friends. My general activities bring me into contact with them. It is neither reasonable nor practicable for me to refrain from eating that meat. To do so will separate me from my otherwise proper life. In Paul's discussion, the gentiles are described as the strong because they were the ones with the assured social position.

The Jewish Christians took a different view. In most cities with a sizable Jewish population, they had a separate market selling kosher products, including meat. From their perspective, eating meat that had been dedicated to idols was colluding with wrong. Just as the gentile Christians were integrated into local gentile life, so the Jewish Christians were integrated into local Jewish life. If not eating was hard for the gentiles, it was easier for the Jews. In Paul's discussion, the Jewish Christians are described as the weak, not in a pejorative way but because they were the more socially disadvantaged ones with less freedom of action.

⁷ [Note to Margaret Court: the Bible isn't meant to be read that literally \(theconversation.com\)](https://www.theconversation.com/2017/09/14/margaret-court-the-bible-isnt-meant-to-be-read-that-literally)

The question was, should the freedom of the gentiles overpower the scruples of the Jews? An answer based on individualism would allow each group and person to do as they wished. The problem facing them was not to be solved in that way. They all belonged to the same Christian community and what each member did affected everyone.

Later, in chapter 10, Paul presents a solution to the problem by having a bit each way, although it is plain that he prefers abstention. He starts out by arguing that food sacrificed to idols is not sacrificed to nothing; it is sacrificed to “demons”.⁸ He then says that, although all things may be lawful, they are not all beneficial; “not all things build up”.⁹ Here he reintroduces the concept of building up.

When it came to actual practice, Paul advised eating what was sold in the market without asking questions. After all, everything comes from God.¹⁰ If you are invited to a banquet, you should go and eat what is before you. If, however, someone tells you that the food had been offered to idols, don’t eat it. Perhaps you shouldn’t have accepted the invitation in the first place.

Paul’s argument concludes with him telling his readers that the other person is the most important in this discussion. Personal rights are not the highest value in such situations. Now, back to free speech. Such a right, which is of high value, exists only in a community. What is the point of free speech without an audience? Paul would then say that it must be exercised in such a way as not to damage the other. This is not the same as requiring that I speak only to those who agree with me. It is not the same as arguing that any objection should silence me. It is to say that I should judge my utterances appropriately in the context, which is what Paul said about eating meat.

This is the appropriate argument in the events we have recently experienced. It is also the appropriate argument for the church in its public utterances.

[I had intended to end my sermon with the following. When I came to it, I found that I didn’t need anything else. I have, however, kept the material here for anyone who reads the sermon online]

This is part of an Epiphany prayer by Walter Brueggemann:

There is a time to be born, and it is now

There is a time to be born and a time to die.
And this is a time to be born.
So we turn to you, God of our life,
God of our years
God of our beginning.
Our times are in your hand.

Hear us as we pray:
For those of us too much into obedience,
birth us to the freedom of the gospel.
For those of us too much into self-indulgence,
birth us to discipleship in your ministry.
For those too much into cynicism,

⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:20-22

⁹ 10:23

¹⁰ 10:25-26

birth us to the innocence of the Christ child.
For those of us too much into cowardice,
birth us to the courage to stand before
principalities and powers.
For those of us too much into guilt,
birth us into forgiveness worked in your generosity.
For those of us too much into despair,
birth us into the promises you make to your people.
For those of us too much into control,
birth us into the vulnerability of the cross.
For those of us too much into victimization,
birth us into the power of Easter.
For those of us too much into fatigue,
birth us into the energy of Pentecost.

*[We dare pray that you will do for us and among us and through us
what is needful for newness.*

*Give us the power to be receptive,
to take the newness you give,
to move from womb warmth to real life.*

*We make this prayer not only for ourselves, but
for our school at the brink of birth,
for the church at the edge of life,
for our city waiting for newness,
for your whole creation, with which we yearn
in eager longing.*

*There is a time to be born, and it is now.
We sense the pangs and groans of your newness.
Come here now in the name of Jesus. Amen.]¹¹*

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 150-151
[newness – stochasticity \(benjaminmiller.org\)](http://benjaminmiller.org)

