

Epiphany IV (January 29, 2012)

*“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

As Canadian citizens, we have rights and responsibilities. Some of our rights include democratic rights, freedoms of expression, and freedoms of assembly and association. Some of our responsibilities include our need to obey our country’s laws and to respect the rights and freedoms of others. Some might say that we live in a rights-oriented society in which we tend to emphasize our rights and downplay our responsibilities. Our courts are busy trying to keep up with guarding the rights, real and imagined, of groups and of individuals. Some perhaps think that society owes us the freedom to be who we are and do what we

please, as we please and when we please. Others might argue that we have a need to emphasize our rights because, without appropriate safeguards, our society would have a tendency to trample on the legitimate rights of groups and of individuals, especially if certain responsibilities are over-emphasized.

So when it comes to rights and responsibilities, what is right? It sounds like quite the complicated puzzle and juggle. Which should have the greater emphasis and get the most attention? Should we attempt to balance these things equally, or is one more worthy of our devotion than the other? This is not a simple consideration, and we could spend much time looking at the various angles of this topic from political, theoretical, and a host of other perspectives; so, for our

purposes this morning, let us consider the Biblical perspective that is relevant to our Christian life.

In our Second Lesson this morning, St. Paul uses the example of eating food sacrificed to idols. Such an example perhaps means little to us in our context, but the lesson for us is the same. Paul speaks of how it is possible—and wrong—to fulfil our desires, even legitimate desires, in a way that would encourage someone else to devote himself to what is wrong—to a false god; to a false desire. This, in turn, would set our neighbour off track in her life's walk with the Living God. Yes, our neighbour is her own person with her own conscience, but that does not nullify our potential influence on our neighbour. Let us delve deeper and take a closer look at what St. Paul is getting at, touching

on the example of eating food for the sake of continuity and convenience.

As we know, we eat food in order to have our desires, including our hunger, satisfied. Our bodies have cravings, and we seek to placate those cravings. Paul's point is that we ought to recognize cravings of a higher order that go beyond the immediate and short-sighted desires of the body and the self. Satisfying our hunger is not bad in and of itself, but there are more considerations that should be at play. Paul suggests that we ought to broaden our desires so that, above all, we desire love, which includes love of neighbour. If my behaviour will lead someone to act against his conscience, even if that behaviour is good and just according to my own conscience, then I am misusing the

liberty which is, indeed, rightly mine. But my responsibility to love exceeds that right and, in fact, cancels out that right. If I am chiefly interested in promoting the love of God, then I would desire not to do anything that would stand in the way of my primary desire.

In the same way, knowledge is not an end in itself, but knowledge is to be used in the service of love. I may know something you do not know, I may know that it is acceptable to act in a certain way, but if I use that knowledge carelessly and selfishly, my knowledge has failed to be of proper use, and my knowledge is unworthy and worthless. Only when I apply what I know in order to love does my knowledge become properly useful and properly good.

These considerations circle back to the ever-important consideration of stewardship. God gives us everything that is His which He creates and sustains, and we, as stewards entrusted with God's things, are charged with using those resources for His greater glory. And when we do so—when our desires are properly aligned to His will for His creation (which includes us)—then our hearts shall rest in peace and they shall be filled with joy. Our desires are properly ordered when each and every one of them points ultimately to Love Divine, all loves excelling.

For Christians, the puzzle and juggle of rights and responsibilities is simplified by a single centre piece. As Christians, we have a centring focus which holds together all peripheral considerations—and that

centring focus is Jesus Christ, the One who is the revelation of Divine Love to humanity. In other words, love trumps all. This is the essential and core truth of Jesus. His life was a fulfilling of love's desire, and, as disciples of our Master, all that we are—all that we do and all that we say—all is subject to the same law of love, and that perfect Way is revealed to us in the footsteps of Jesus which we endeavour to follow in faith.

A “prophet who speaks in the name of other gods” is a concern we find in the First Lesson—such a person is one with godly knowledge who uses that knowledge in devotion to an ungodly end. The prophet is a “[steward] of the mysteries of God,” as St. Paul puts it (1 Cor. 4. 1), and misusing what is God's leads to our own peril and such misuse can also lead to the peril of

others. We who have the privilege to be stewards have our joy truly realized when we properly use the tools God places in our hands—when we build up the Kingdom of God, which is love in action. While knowledge can puff up within us ungodly and inconsiderate pride and be destructive, love can only be constructive—it can only build up and build upon itself, Christ being made the sure Foundation. That love can build and, I pray, will build us up here at St. John's more and more into a spiritual habitation to house the Lord of Love Himself. Let us get out God's tools and allow Him to build His Kingdom in us and through us, for His greater glory, for our joy, and for the joy of the world.

*Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all honour, power, glory, might, majesty and dominion, both now and for evermore.*

*Father A. E. Nussey*