

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1
BEING DISTINCTIVE.

Your friend, your neighbour has invited you to dinner at his house. You get on well with him, but he's never invited you before. You decide to go; 7 for 7.30pm. The food is served and smells delicious and everyone begins to eat and the wine is flowing and the conversation is good. Then part-way through the meal, your host interrupts the conversation to announce that as part of the banquet, he needs to make an offering to the gods and so takes some of the meal you've been eating and offers the same food to the household gods at the shrine in the corner of the room; he places the plate before the gold statue and offers his prayers for the blessing of the banquet and his household at the same time. As a Christian who believes in Jesus, what do you do? The next time he invites you to his banquet, do you accept his invitation?

A friend invites you to a banquet; it is a family occasion and he wants you to come along with them. He tells you that the banquet will be held at The Temple; now this is not a new restaurant in Edinburgh New Town opened by the latest celebrity chef. No! This is what it says: the Temple, the place where people go to worship their gods and as part of the temple there is a room where people can eat a meal together. Usually, the food that is served would have been offered as a sacrifice to the gods first and then brought to be served to the family to eat. The name of the god would have been used on the invitation; "you are invited in the name of Aphrodite..." and as part of the banquet, prayers would be said to Aphrodite or whatever other god was your friend's favourite! As a Christian who believes in Jesus, what do you do? Do you accept his invitation? Or do you stay away?

These were dilemmas facing Christians in Corinth in first century. A couple of weeks ago we were talking about the mission of the Church and how good it is for us to be involved in the mix of community life and to be part of that rhythm of interaction with people of all sorts, in the hope that something of our world and our faith might rub off on them. We said then that only as we do that, can we be Christ's ambassadors in our world. But where do you draw the line? Are there situations in which, as Christians, we would not feel comfortable? How would it be if, at a party, people pulled out a ouija board and started trying to use it or other occult practices? Do we stay and take part, or do we leave? Some Christians find it really hard to take part in multi-faith worship events because it is not clear about which god we are praying to and they find it hard to reconcile others' different concepts of God with the God of the Bible and of Jesus.

This is about our sense of identity. How do we define ourselves? "I am..." what? "I am an architect" and we define ourselves by the work we do. So what happens when we stop work and retire – how then do we define our identity? "I am a teenager", but then a large number of people brand all teenagers as troublemakers, so how easy is it to see that as a good identity? What about our Christian identity, as a Church, as individuals? Who are we? Are we just like any other group in the community? Or is there something that makes us different, distinctive? We believe that Jesus is Lord; we belong to Jesus; that is ultimately who we are and nothing we do should compromise that.

The Christians in Corinth were obviously struggling with this, with where to draw the lines about what is acceptable and what is to be avoided. In his first letter to them he quoted them as saying, about life, that "Everything is permissible". "There are no limits, no boundaries; we can do whatever we like!" Even then Paul challenged them to think in a different way: he said "Everything is permissible"; 'yes, that's probably true, but "not everything is beneficial; not everything is constructive"'. In other words, you may feel free to do whatever you like, but not everything you might do is good for you or is good for the Church or is, finally and far more importantly, not everything

you might do is for the glory of God. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul takes this a step further. Where do we draw the lines? Why draw lines at all?

“Do not...” (6:14a) If you have heard any sermons on these verses before, I can almost guarantee that the sermon would be about marriage and how Christians should not marry non-Christians because they are coming from very different starting-points. In actual fact, there is nothing in this passage directly about marriage at all; Paul is not writing about who the Christian should or should not marry in that kind of exact way. He writes five rhetorical questions in beautifully balanced pairs, about the things that are in common, each question expecting the answer ‘none’ or such like! So *“for what...” (6:14-16)* The overwhelming impression that we are meant to have is that these pairs have nothing in common at all; indeed light and darkness are totally incompatible; Christ and the devil are sworn enemies, totally at loggerheads with one another. So, the last of these is the point that Paul is trying to make: the temples of idols have nothing in common with the temple of the living God and that Christians are different and distinctive from the world in which they live.

As if to reinforce that, he quotes and alludes to various Old Testament Bible pieces that, in their different ways, say the same thing – God’s people are distinctive. God has made a promise first of all in the days of Moses, the promise that He would live amongst His people, that He would walk with them and be their God and because He was their God, they would be His people. Another suggests that the people of God are to be separate from the world, to be a holy people. God is holy and so His people are to be holy. Holiness doesn’t start with our morals and the need for us to be good or perfect. Holiness begins with God and speaks of God as someone distinctive and different; holiness is about the separation that exists between God and the world, that He is different from us. That sense of separation brings with it the notion that God is pure and perfect, but holiness starts with the sense that God is not of this world, that God is not like us.

So, Paul ends up by saying: because God is holy, separate and *“Since we...” (7:1)* What is distinctive about the Christian? If we think it is a good idea that Christians are completely involved in the day-to-day mix of the community and the world and meeting people of all kinds, the question still remains – what makes the Christian distinctive? What makes the Christian teenager distinctive from others in their class (at time when the last thing teenagers really want is to be different!)? What makes the Christian in the office different from the others who work there? What makes the Christian teacher distinctive or the Christian doctor or the Christian parent or the Christian husband/wife? We breathe the same air as everyone else; we eat the same food, we drink the same water, we are warmed by the same sun, we are soaked by the same rain, so what makes the Christian distinctive?

There are two things and they are related:

1)we are a people who belong to God: now in a general sense everyone belongs to God because God is the giver of life, but in Christ we belong to God in a different way; we are called His children and He is our Father in a way that belongs only to the person of faith. This is who we are; this is our identity as Christians. There is no reason here for us to boast or develop a sense of being ‘the elite’ because this is a gift of God’s grace to us, not something we deserve. Nonetheless, this is who we are, a people who belong to God and so a holy people, set apart, in the world but not of the world, our citizenship is in heaven. God has promised to walk with us through life, to go with us wherever we go, to help and strengthen us in all that life throws at us because we are His people, because we belong to Him. We are even the temple of God, the people in whom He lives by His Spirit; the temple of God is no longer a place, but a people because God lives in us – *“We are...” (6:16)* This is who we are; this is a huge part of our Christian identity as the Church and as individuals; if we

lose this sense of identity, we lose so much of the sense of privilege and honour that comes with belonging to Jesus.

2)we are becoming more like Jesus – this should follow from the first, that being God's people, being a people who belong to God, we are becoming more and more like Jesus. This is not automatic, it does not happen by accident, it does not happen to us while we're asleep, but it happens as we put into practice the words of Jesus, and live by his example. We've just finished a Bible Study series in the Sermon on the Mount and it is full of Jesus' teaching about life and Christian standards and values for life as Jesus teaches us; it ends up with the little story about the wise man who built his house on rock – *"everyone who..." (Mt 7:24)* We become more and more like Christ as we put into practice His teaching, teaching about the kind of people we are, about the things we value, about the things that we feel are important, about our ambitions, and how we trust God, and the way in which we relate to other people. Not only do we listen to His teaching, but we watch Jesus in action: what do we see? In the gospels we see a man full of love and compassion, a man who loves what is right and good, who has a deep sense of justice, and a concern for everyone. When we take all of that and put it into practice, we become more and more like Jesus in the way we think, the way we speak, the way we behave and we become people who are distinctive in the world.

It is good for us to be in the mix of life, in the day-to-day rhythm of life, the community and friendships. But the challenge we also face is to be distinctive in that mix. There is a real danger of the Church losing its cutting edge in our race to be liked and to be part of the community, to lose that sense of distinctiveness. There are two ways in which Churches have shaped this relationship with the world: the first is to retreat behind a big wall, either real or metaphorical, to make sure at all costs that the distinctiveness of the Church is preserved and that nothing contaminates us. The other is to become part of the world, to give up any thought of being distinctive to be seen to be just like everyone else. The Bible's way is right in the middle: to be part of the mix and to be distinctive. Jesus is Lord of our lives: He gives us different values and we need to live them out in the mix of community life, to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The Church's best value to the world is in us knowing exactly who we are and living that out.

Being distinctive is not always a comfortable place to be; it is much easier at times just to be like everyone else and blend in to background; there are times when we don't want to be different and we certainly don't want to be seen to be different; it is becoming harder in our world to be different, as our world is becoming less and less tolerant of that kind of difference. So we're pulled in two directions: in one way to befriend people and to be part of the community and the mix and the day-to-day rhythm of life; in the other way to be holy people, people who love God and want to glorify God; we have to learn to live with that tension.

We are people who belong to God – what a privilege that is. God promises to be with us, to live with us, to walk with us, to live in us by Spirit. These are huge promises that make us hugely privileged people. We are people who belong to God – that brings with it a huge responsibility: to be like Jesus in the way we think, in the way we speak, in the way we behave; to glorify God by the kind of people that we are; to reflect God to the world in which we live. We are a distinctive people because we belong to God. That is a huge boon to us, as a people whom God loves in a special way; the people with whom He has promised to walk. It is also a huge challenge to be the kind of people that God wants us to be, to be like Christ, to be holy. Enjoy the privilege; let us rise to the challenge!