

Good morning, my name is Gaius. I am a member of the church in Corinth. We met here some weeks ago. I then told you about Paul's leadership and about Paul as our spiritual father. I asked you if you have a spiritual father or mother or both. Are you still loyal to them? Do you still trust them? Do you remember what they taught you?

I am back today because I need to share more with you. I was digesting the middle bit of Paul's letter and it just helps to chat about it. Paul is addressing our eating of meat. This meat is a big issue here: the only way for the poor to get meat often is when it left over from sacrifices in pagan temples. Meat is rare for the poor. After a festival or a sacrifice it goes to market. For Jews such meat would be forbidden anyway. Yet Paul seems to be saying: the meat is OK in itself. It may have been sacrificed, but the Greek gods don't exist. What you buy in the market is fine – but do stay away from the pagan temples. That is a bit complicated! In writing about this meat, Paul also coined a new word [*eidōlotuthon*, 8:1, 4, 7; 10:19]. That word will now have to go into the next edition of the Greek dictionary!

Anyway, Paul is trying hard to build us as a church which loves and respects all. Paul also made us think about what we are doing. Don't we all need that, a good 360° rethink of priorities?

'Monotheism', belief in one God only, is new to us of course. Paul is a Jew so for him it's more natural. (Well, the Jews also had their Baal and Astarte.) We had many gods, like Zeus, Hermes, Apollo, Athene, Hades, Poseidon. We have now learned there is only one God: Father, Son and Spirit [8:6]. I love God, the God of Israel – but it's hard to forget our own gods. After all, we have only been Christians for a few year. I wonder what **you** struggle with. I saw a few things during my visit to England: Haunted castles, ghost stories, witchcraft, belief in karma and palmists by the sea. Or is that just money, sex and power? In any case, be careful. Paul wants you to be radical as well. Other gods don't exist.

Back to this meat issue. The majority of us thought we could eat it. But we disagreed. We now understand that we need to avoid paganism first of all. Paul is careful. He wants us to put each other's interest before our own interest; to give up our rights for each other – as he does himself. As he writes [10:23]: "I have the right to do anything,' you say – but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' – but not everything builds up." That is so true!

And then you get this confusing thing: Paul insists our old gods don't exist [10:19], but we still need to keep our distance [10:14]. Idols are nothing, but they still have power. From what I understand about you, you need to stop talking about robins and butterflies. A robin is not a deceased parent. But Paul does warn against demons [10:20], so they somehow exist!!

And typically Paul: he ends his discussion with mission [10:32-33], 'so that they may be saved'. Paul has been hammering this into us: we are not just here for ourselves; we are God's missionaries. Here, in our own town. How we live, makes all the difference. They're watching us all the time.

O yes, what a beautiful saying Paul includes: 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.' [10:26]. Maximus pointed out to us that this comes from Psalm 24; most of us had not noticed.

'The earth and its content belong to God.' Think about that for a moment! We have now come to worship a God who is not Greek or Roman or Jewish, but universal!

So we don't have to withdraw from society. We can still meet our pagan friends. We can have pagan friends. You probably have many because you also live in a pagan world. We are not in danger of being defiled. But we can't join them in their pagan worship. We should not be seen where Zues, money, sex or power is worshipped; we should not agree when butterflies and robins are called 'ancestors'. And we better stay away from ghosts and palmists.

Paul then says: 'Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.' [11:1] He lived here in Corinth, of course, for many months. He was so outgoing, friendly, wise! He showed us what Christ is like. It's Jesus we follow. We need to ask: 'What would Paul do?', 'What would Jesus do?' Paul said: 'Jesus does not want fans, he wants followers.'

Some here say that Paul is making himself too big; that there is too much emphasis on himself. But I disagree. He is our founder, our example. We have never seen Jesus, but we have observed Paul closely. As I understand it, Christ gave his life for us. Paul is giving his life as well (in a way). That puts the bar high.

I have probably been rambling; sorry. Maybe there are four points here:

1. Paul wants us to put each other's interest before our own interest; to give up our rights for each other – as he does himself.
2. These gods don't exist. There's no need to fear them. But stop talking about robins and butterflies.
3. Paul wants us to love and respect each other.
4. Jesus wants true followers, not just fans.