

**St Botolph's Church Worthing**  
**24 July 2016 Evensong**  
**1 Corinthians 10: 1-24**

**Reverend Roger Walker**

We've had two long Scripture readings this afternoon, so we will have a short sermon. I want to take just three words from the end of the second Reading from 1 Corinthians 10, where St Paul writes 'Everything is permissible'. That does not fit well with the preceding verses, which made clear that in the Old Testament – when God was providing for his people on their journey to the Promised Land. He punished them for various sins: for idolatry, for sexual immorality: for putting the Lord to the test: for grumbling. This is certainly doesn't sound as if 'everything is permissible', and then, coming to his own time, St Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for tolerating divisions, in their ranks. Chapter 3 – for suing each other in the law courts and Chapter 6 for sexual immorality, Chapters 5 & 6 and – in the words we heard today – of idolatry – not making a clear distinction between worshipping him and worshipping idols.

'Everything is permissible'? It does not sound like it, but in fact what St Paul is doing is quoting something that the Corinthians have written to him – 1 & 2 Corinthians are one side of a correspondence between Paul and the Christians in Corinth. Sadly, no one preserved their side of it and so we have to make educated guesses at what they wrote to Paul – the comments they made and the questions they asked.

Some of them were clearly putting forward a Christian heresy known as antinomianism: there's a nice long word for you. Antinomianism means literally 'against law everything is permissible'. It was the teaching that, because God gives us the grace of forgiveness, it does not matter what we do as we will be forgiven and enter heaven.

It is a very beguiling teaching and it is an understandable misinterpretation of some of Paul's teaching, for in his Epistles we read things like these words from Ephesians 'In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with God's grace which he lavished upon us'. There is no mention of repentance or of living a Christian life.

You can see how people could get the wrong idea and, indeed St Paul finds forgiveness of sins through the shedding of Christ's blood so central to his teaching that he does not condemn the Corinthian antinomianists out of hand. For he writes 'everything is permissible, but not every thing is beneficial. Everything is permissible but not everything is constructive.' He ends rather weakly 'nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others'.

So what are we to make of this, and can we do anything we want and be confident that at the end of the day God will forgive us? If we look carefully at our lives we may be rather horrified to see how often we edge close to this position when faced with a string temptation. Yes, we repent, yes, we confess

– but then so often we backslide. We can be in danger of being what you might call antinomianists, with our lives conflicting with our professed beliefs. Is there an answer to this? Yes, there is – and it is another form of antinomianism. St Augustine said ‘Love God and do what you want’. I will leave you with that to reflect and ponder upon.

AMEN

Rev Roger Walker

24.7.16