

St. Alban's Epping/Zoom Service, 13th September 2020

“LOVING – DESPITE OUR DIFFERENCES”

(Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; **Romans 14:1-19**; Matthew 18:21-35)

A church is not a club.

You may remember that those were the opening words of my sermon last Sunday, which was based on Romans 13. What I wanted to point out then was that we must not be focussed on ourselves, but as followers of Christ we must seek to connect with the community and society round about. Amongst other things, that will involve being good citizens and being loving neighbours, showing the love of Christ in our loves.

In **Romans 14**, which we read this morning, Paul reminds us that a church is not merely a club of like-minded people, but a community of people who may be very different from one another, a community of people who nevertheless love one another despite our differences, a community of people who welcome visitors and newcomers and outsiders despite their differences from many of us. For all sorts of reasons, some Christians are not easy to love, but as members of Christ's family we **are to love one another**.

And in today's reading, Paul focuses on **how we handle our differences** as a pointer to what a loving church community looks like.

There are two specific issues that Paul writes about. The main issue is about what different Christians believe it is OK to eat. Some Christians have decided that they should be vegetarian, while others say that it is quite OK to eat meat.

Why this difference? There are a couple of likely reasons. Many Christians came from a Jewish background, and may have felt it was important to maintain their dietary traditions and restrictions. They believed as Jewish Christians that the food **they** ate should be kosher. And in many parts of the Roman Empire it would be hard to be sure that the meat that they could buy was kosher. Hence these people decided that they should not eat meat. Some of them no doubt believed that **all Jewish Christians** should accept this restriction, and some may even have believed that **all Christians** should accept it, and become vegetarian. After all, they might have said, Christ was the fulfilment of the Old Testament: he fulfilled it, but he didn't do away with it.

Other Christians who were from a pagan background would especially be aware that most meat you could buy in a market would first of all have been taken to a pagan temple and offered to the gods. There was no

straightforward way of being sure that the meat you bought was not tainted by idolatry. Surely one must therefore not eat meat at all.

Now these were not minor issues for Christians. We are all called to take up our cross and follow Jesus! Surely a faithful Christian must therefore be willing to give up meat in order to avoid eating something which might be spiritually polluted, or which might offend Jews, whether they are followers of Christ or not.

But there was another side to the issue. An idol is a nothing, a nonsense. It has no power to do good, but it is powerless to actually do evil. So if the meat on sale has perhaps been offered in sacrifice to such a non-entity, it really doesn't matter.

Hence Paul's teaching is that a Christian is free to eat meat without having to investigate what might have happened to it in the past. This is part of our liberty in Christ. Mind you, elsewhere in his letters, Paul makes clear that Christians are **not** free to go to a pagan temple and **join in** a feast in honour of a pagan god: idolatry is a denial of Christ, but the actual eating of meat at home or with friends is a different matter. The old Jewish food laws of what is clean and what is unclean no longer apply, as Jesus himself made clear. So Paul comes down on the side of liberty.

And yet he doesn't tell the vegetarians that they are wrong and that they should start eating meat. They have come to a conscientious decision about what they eat and that decision is to be respected. They are seeking to obey Christ as faithfully as they can.

There may have been some vegetarians who got Paul's point and realized that it was OK for Christians to eat meat, but Paul didn't **tell** them to do that. Paul's main concern was another issue: the issue of **how we love each other** as church members.

It would be easy for the vegetarians to look at the meat-eaters and to say: “That person can't be a real Christian if they compromise like that!” They could easily condemn those who ate meat.

And it would be easy for the libertarians to say: “Look at those legalists, those narrow-minded people, those fuddy-duddies. They've missed the point. Christ has set us free from all those rules and regulations.” They could easily look down on them and despise them.

Jesus of course made clear that **we are not to judge others**. That is God's job, not ours. And both Jesus and Paul made clear that **we are to be humble in our treatment of each other**: we are not to despise others who

are made in God's image, we are not to look down on others, who matter just as much to God as we do.

These principles apply to Paul's other example, which probably referred mainly to Christian Jews who thought it was very important to continue to observe the Sabbath and the special festivals which marked the Jewish year, and which commemorated significant events in the story of Israel.

Paul insisted that observing special days were not a particular requirement that God demands of Christians. Our faith is seven days a week, not just reserved for particular days and festivals. Some Christians may observe these special days, while others do not. All are seeking to honour God in their different ways as they follow Christ. We are not to judge those who do not hold to everything we see as important. We are not to look down on people who seem to get caught up in traditions and practices that we don't see as terribly important.

And we are not to push or encourage people to do something which goes against their conscience. No, our conscience is actually not an infallible guide, but it does express something important. And if we do something with a guilty conscience, it harms our close relationship with God.

So Paul knows what he believes, but the bigger issue with him is that we treat each other with humility and with love. And when we **recognize** our differences, humility and love must come into play as well.

I grew up in a church where people might drink alcohol at home or in company, but where alcohol was never served at any church functions. It made sense to me, but when I came to work in the Parish of Epping in the late 1970's, I discovered a different approach. I came along to my first Parish Dinner, and wine was served.

I was initially taken aback. I had heard of churches which did serve wine on such occasions, but I had grown up with the view that this was not the right thing for a church to do. I do not remember for sure, but I suspect that I did not have any wine on that occasion, although I don't think I made an issue of it at the time. After a number of events, I came to the point where I was comfortable about having a drink on these occasions. Nowadays I am amused that a number of churches which used to be very strict about not having alcohol, even for Holy Communion, have in recent years arranged Wine Tastings and Beer Tastings as evangelistic outreach events!

But if I was leading a church in an area where the abuse of alcohol was clearly a major community problem, or where there were alcoholics in the

congregation, I might well judge that it would be helpful not to have alcohol served at church functions.

Indeed, at a previous church, we had an alcoholic who was a member of the congregation, and we decided to have small cups with grape juice available as an alternative when Communion was on. This was actually made use of by a number of members of the congregation, and not just the person for whom the decision was made. It would not have been not my natural preference, but it was an expression of loving support for particular members of the congregation

Churches have often been seen as judgemental on a whole range of issues. Sometimes the issues are vital, but so often the issues are secondary, or at least open to debate.

Without compromising on the central issues of the Gospel, we need to recognize that there are often differences of opinion on particular matters, and even differences in interpreting the scriptures. In recent decades, an obvious example has been about the ministry of women. I support the ordination of women, and believe it is scriptural, but very clearly in the wider church there are many – particularly in this Diocese – who believe that it is incompatible with the scriptures. Sadly there has been far too much **shouting** about the issue from people with different views. We will of course seldom change a person's mind by arguing with them. Often it seems that when we win the **argument**, we fail to win the person.

Let's accept that we are different, and we may well see and understand particular things differently. Our differences can enrich the life of the church. When issues come up that disturb us, let us remember the importance of humility. Let us be quick to listen, quick to try to understand. Let us be slow to say: "You're wrong", and quick to say "Can you help me to understand your viewpoint?" And let us pray for true perspective on **what actually matters** and what Christians can legitimately differ on.

The Kingdom of God, as Paul says, is not about food and drink, or about special days, or lots of other secondary things: it is about righteousness and peace and joy – about pleasing God and having good relationships, and rejoicing in God's blessings in Christ. Our concern must be less about showing people what we think are their faults, and more about loving and understanding and accepting each other in Christ, as God has accepted us.

May people be able to look at this church community and say: "They're a mixed bunch, but see how these Christians love one another". Amen. Paul Weaver