

Sermon – 13 September 2020 - Romans 14.1 – 12, Matthew 18.21 - 35

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Paul's letter to the Romans, which we have been reading in bite sized chunks over the last few weeks, is unlike his other letters. Sit and read the whole thing as one letter sometime soon, we all need to read Scripture as written, and not just hear it occasionally in bite sized chunks.

It is unlike his other letters because it was not written to a church he knew well. Colossians, Philippians, etc – they were all written to churches he had founded, churches where he had lived and worked. Often he was replying to questions people had asked, and it would be wonderful if we had the letters that people had written to him – it might make it easier to understand and cope with some of the answers, if only we knew what the questions were.

But in Romans, Paul is writing to an important church, the church at the centre of the Empire. He probably knows that he will go there – he probably planned a journey there, in reality he went as a prisoner. He was Roman Citizen so, when he was arrested, he had the right to appeal to the Emperor. Read the last few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, that will give you the story.

So Paul has used his letter to set out his theology, set out his understanding of the faith, tell the church about himself, and what he believed. And when you set out your beliefs, set out what you believe to be this new Christian faith, you then have to cope with those who struggle with faith. Paul has been part of churches for years, and Paul knows how good we are at “quarrelling over opinions”. Too many people with nice strong faith are very good at talking down those who are weak.

“Welcome those who are weak in faith” – actually they may be strong in faith, but weak from your point of view. Accept their weakness, accept the differences, and be together.

The vegetarians among us (including Julie who read the lesson for us) will argue with Paul's comment about “the weak eat only vegetables”. My vegetarian friends can tell me, often in a lot of detail, why eating vegetables is the strong, the right thing to do – sorry folk, I need the occasional fry up, and you can't have a fry up without sausage and bacon. One of the things that has got me through the last few months is the lovely Croots Farm shop, their lamb pin wheels and meat pies. But I do feel guilty when I look a lamb in the face.

There is probably something deeper in Paul's denunciation – much of the meat sold in markets across the Empire had been offered in sacrifice to what Paul

would describe as pagan gods. So it wasn't just the fact it was meat, it was what it represented, if it had been accepted in worship of another god, could a Christian eat it with a clear conscience. Some would say "No, of course not, buy accepting it we are approving of that sacrifice." Others would say "Yes, it's meat, its source is irrelevant, enjoy" – and you can imagine the arguments, the disagreements.

Paul is certain. "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them."

Again, "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike." Did you accept the Jewish sabbath, Saturday, as your holy day? Did you accept Sunday, the day of resurrection, as your holy day? If you were a Roman slave, and had to work on Saturday and Sunday – how, when, did you worship? – and how did others in the church respond?

"Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God." The important thing is doing whatever you're doing to honour God, to give thanks to God, to put God first.

Of course we discuss what is right and what is wrong. Of course we disagree over the best way forward – but so often there should be a variety of practice, a variety of belief, because people are different.

It is not easy. We've worked hard to get our two church buildings reopened, but then people complain we haven't opened them for the service they want. Every week I spend an hour or two putting material on the website so you can find a full order of service there, and worship along with everyone else. Some are doing so – many are not, and the ones who are not are the ones muttering that I'm doing nothing. That hurts. Several of the bigger, livelier churches in Derby are doing all their worship on youtube because that's obviously the way forward – and the BBC quietly dropped a televised Sunday morning service several months ago, because (of course) no one wants to watch church on television (and the leadership of the Church of England made no comment).

I got an email this last week headed "**The Bishop's vision and strategic framework**". Those of you who attended Chapter in July, or are a member of the various Diocesan committees will be aware that change is in the air. There are some difficult decisions ahead as we see the outworking of Bishop Libby's new vision for the Diocese and we will need to process a number of

changes around: finance, deployment, diocese structures, buildings, lay training and Church House support. I know this will lead to anxiety for some and excitement for others. I pray that we will be able to work through some of the implications together as a deanery in the coming months. This will involve some careful listening and working out what we need in all the different contexts across the city. I hope that the example of the SE review and new housing review which are both coming towards a close, can be a model of how we can ensure we marry up a top down and bottom up approach to change.”

You can imagine my immediate response – top down and bottom up, raspberry.

Yet even I can see that changes are going to have to be made – they were going to have to be made before Covid, and they’ll be even more necessary now. If the Bishop had no vision, I would be one of the first to moan – so how dare I moan when she produces a vision she wants to share with us. The challenge will be to read through it, pray through it – if it challenges the way we’ve done things in the past, is she right? If it gives us a new vision for the future, are we brave enough to grasp it? We’ll need to discuss it at PCCs – not just sit there in silence – and to share it, pray through, talk about it, as God’s people together in worship.

In the near future – how do we simply face the next few weeks, have we vision? We won’t have packed churches for harvest – we won’t have lots of Brownies bringing food for the food bank – so how do we celebrate God’s creation, and ensure the hungry are fed? We normally welcome over a hundred people into church for All Souls’, people who come to remember those they have loved and lost. I can’t invite 150 people this year – so how do I write to them assuring them of God’s love, our prayers, give them light in their darkness. Eight weeks today is Remembrance Sunday – we can’t do a packed church, presumably I can’t even take a standard off someone and lay it on the altar, certainly we can’t hand out crosses to be placed by the War Memorial. That’s going to need managing – not just here, but across the country – and the danger is that, when it goes wrong and there’s a row between the Vicar and the Legion, it will be seen as the church’s fault. Then there’s the little matter of Christmas.

Some will tell me that all I need to do is believe in our Prime Minister’s vision. Julie often has Virgin Radio on, and they have a campaign with the Sun to “stick two lots of optimism in the nation’s tea.” The media tells me that it’s whining lefties and remainers like me that are causing all the problems, and that if I have faith he will defeat the virus and we’ll all be in sun-lit British uplands in a few weeks.

Paul tells me not to despise my brother or sister, I'm sorry, I find that very difficult. But even Mr Johnson is my brother, so I had better try, pray for wisdom and, if I'm going to argue, I need to argue with manners and be willing to listen. Having said that, it is not good enough to keep quiet when people are suffering, when huge amounts of public money are being siphoned off by a few rich people, and when the rule of Law is being torn up. Evil has to be fought.

Paul gives us a hard truth. We will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

The Gospel is hard too. Do we show pity to the poor – did I pity the chap who came round to the door last week trying to sell me dishcloths etc I didn't want? If someone owes us money, do we forgive? We own a house in Newcastle, and our tenant failed to pay the rent one month recently. I was calm, reasonable, reminded myself that I have a guaranteed wage every month, that most others are not so fortunate in a pandemic, and I am not dependent on that particular part of our income. I'm glad to say that a few months later, everything is sorted – but if I was still waiting, or I had been desperate, or he had defaulted again – forgiveness would probably be a long way from my mind.

The Lord is angry when he sees what the forgiven slave has done, how he has treated his fellow slaves – the gospel packs its punch. You do not treat people like this – you are forgiven, and you must forgive.

So let's do our best – to forgive, to defuse anger, to be positive, to stand up for the underdogs or those getting the blame, to acknowledge that people are often nastiest when they are afraid – and there is a lot of fear around at the moment.

We know "it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God." God is love, God is eternal, God is more powerful than any virus or any world leader. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God" – so may he guide us, forgive us, and grant us wisdom. Amen.