



## Revd Ro's Reflection on 15th Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 19

### Year A

**Romans 14.1-12**

**Matthew 18.21-35**

I have just come back from picking raspberries on my allotment. I picked them all, as I thought, then went on to get sweet peas. I came back to pick up the punnet and looked at them again, this time from another angle and with the sun shining on them. To my delight I discovered a load more I hadn't seen before.

Studying bible passages or any good literature is just like this. The more you look the more you see. Another thing that helps you understand more is to read the passage in its context, in the light of what has gone before.

This passage from Romans follows from last week's so we are able to do just that.

Last time I wrote, 'The reading from Romans is continuing his teaching to those early converts. Paul calls himself 'the apostle to the Gentiles.' These people will have come from a myriad backgrounds, traditions and creeds. Paul is teaching them of Jesus' way.'

Paul is writing to the newly formed 'church' in Romans. Not everyone would have been at the same stage in their faith. Some would have been newly converted, others might have been Christians for some time and be living in Rome. There would have been many different traditions and backgrounds; some would have been Jews still following Jewish practices, others would have been pagans and used to worshipping other gods with the attendant traditions of that worship.

When many traditions meet there will be clashes and disputes over what is right. Here Paul is dealing with two of them. Firstly, what is clean, or acceptable to eat, a person from Jewish background might still be observing traditional Jewish laws about food, food preparation and so on. So if an animal had been offered in a temple or not prepared in the correct way there was no way they would touch it. The same might be true of converts from other religions that had turned their back on the old ways and eschewed any reminders of them. Paul however had thought this topic

through carefully. If God created everything then all God's creatures are pure and therefore clean, therefore to eat them does not defile a person. Jesus has something to say about this too, 'It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' Matthew 15.10.

Jesus, like Paul, is looking far more deeply than at rules or tradition. It is behaviour, or what is in your heart that matters. When Paul talks about those who are 'weak' I think he means simply those who have not worked this through for themselves yet and come to a full understanding of theology as he has. It is not that they are weak in the faith though they may be new to it. Those who are 'strong' therefore would be those who have understood Jesus' teaching and Paul's understanding of it.

The point is that no one is to judge another person because of a difference of opinion or unimportant tradition as long as the main concern is that everything that is done is done for the glory of Jesus as Lord. That is what matters.

The same is true of those who, 'judge one day better than another,' this would, for example, refer to Jews who still observe the festivals they were used to and holy days. The point is they are now followers of the way, followers of Jesus Christ; this is the main concern. It does not matter if they still wish to observe these days. No one should condemn them. From verse seven Paul reiterates the central theology of the church.

'If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord. To this end Christ died and lived again so that he might be the Lord of the dead and the living.'

Jesus Christ died and rose again. He is part of the Godhead, the second person of the trinity. By his death and resurrection he has won salvation for all who believe in him and live in his way. He will 'Come again to judge both the living and the dead.' That is what we say in the creed. Jesus will be judge over all when God's new creation is established.

These new Christians were learning this. As long as everything they did they did for Jesus and lived according to his teaching, the central one being, 'Love one another as I have loved you,' then traditions such as those outlined above were not important.

As Paul says in chapter 15,

<sup>2</sup> 'Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour.'

This was a fledgling church, in time the church would be established fully with its own ways and traditions but there should always be room for difference.

Applying this to our own time we can learn a great deal from it. It is not Jesus' way that we impose our own will on another person or condemn them for their opinions, as Paul says. 'Not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.' Any judging of others should be reserved for serious matters as Matthew explained in last week's reading. Christian behaviour, says Paul, is not about thinking yourself always to be in the right, having your own way or thinking yourself superior. No, it is walking in Jesus' way, the way of love, respect and tolerance.

If we think of the Christian churches we are in fellowship with, with which we celebrate, particularly in the 'Week for Christian Unity,' it is all about respecting differences of practice and tradition done in honour of Jesus Christ as Lord. My father was a Roman Catholic, mum and I are Anglicans and I am an Anglican priest. Throughout my life I remember lots of discussions with dad about Christianity and our churches, all with a great deal of respect for each other's traditions. We all have a great deal to learn from one another.

Matthew's gospel reading follows on from last week. As I wrote last time, 'Jesus teaches the new way, God's Good News, but human beings are not perfect and there will be wrangles, disputes and people who behave wrongly, as with every community.'

<sup>15</sup> 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.' Matthew 18

That passage from Matthew concentrated on how we should deal with this situation.

This week's passage follows on from this with the perfectly natural enquiry of Peter.

<sup>21</sup> 'Lord if another member of the church sins against me how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'

Peter would have thought that he was being very noble to forgive seven times, after all he had been brought up on Jewish teaching which required nothing like that many. He has not yet understood Jesus' teaching on forgiveness.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you seventy seven times.'

Jesus is not being literal here; any counting of numbers is not forgiveness. As I wrote last time 'We must forgive, that is what we are taught, but if a person wilfully refuses to repent and continues with damaging behaviour then they will damage people, a church or any other institution... That is the tough bit. If forgiveness is central, and Jesus forgave those who were hammering in the nails, then we have to try to do that. **But**, we do not condone bad behaviour which is against Jesus' teaching and we are called on to condemn it and to confront it. 'You can't make a person stop their unacceptable behaviour but you need to stand up to them. That takes courage; especially when the one at fault is the one with the power, be it within an institution or in government.'

I have quoted what I wrote before because it is very relevant here. All of us have to deal with forgiveness. All of us will have to think about how we live it out in our lives. It is an interesting exercise to try to write down what forgiveness means without actually using the word itself. It really helps come to terms with understanding it.

I read a book recently called, 'Why Forgive?' by Johann Christoph Arnold. It deals with real situations, some of them tragic and very moving, and how people come to terms with trying to forgive the perpetrator. Sometimes this forgiveness leads to reconciliation, sometimes it does not but in all the cases people, many who have suffered cruelly at the hands of others, have tried to forgive. They have tried to follow Jesus' teaching.

Forgiveness is not easy. The truth is though, there can be no real healing without forgiveness and not to forgive is often very damaging to the victim. True reconciliation helps both parties and it is what Jesus teaches.

Jesus deals with this in the story that follows. The slave was forgiven by his master and let off a great debt but then he went and treated his fellow slave abominably refusing to forgive him for a tiny debt.

The last line of the story sounds awful, as if God is vengeful but actually what Jesus is saying is, how can you expect forgiveness from God if you refuse to forgive another person? In its broadest terms if you treat people badly and do not repent of that and change your ways how can you expect God to forgive?

We are called on to forgive but not condone. The disciples say to Jesus, 'Teach us how to pray,' his answer, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,' this is central to his teaching and we pray these words every day. Living it out is much more challenging.

Forgiveness is central to the life of a Christian but the story Jesus tells also stresses the fact that no one has the right to injure another person in any way.

It brings us back to 'love one another,' being the fulfilling of Jesus' teaching. If love is at the centre of our behaviour we will be living in his way.

*Christ has no body but yours,*

*No hands, no feet on earth but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks*

*Compassion on this world.*

St Theresa of Avila

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