

You did what in honour of the Lord?!

A sermon on Romans 14:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 September 2017

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Jesus calls us to welcome and honour each other at his table regardless of the disagreements we may have over how to apply biblical teachings.

Sermon

As you may have noticed, we have heard a lot from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome over the last few months. In fact tonight's reading was the last in a thirteen week series from that letter. Romans is often regarded as Paul's most intensely theological letter, and that may well be true, but it is theology that is set out in order to address a specific Christian community dealing with a specific set of community problems.

In tonight's extract we got to the point where the rubber really hits the road; where, having spelt out the theology at length, Paul tells the church in Rome exactly what it all means for the issues that are troubling them. I once heard Keith Dyer, the professor of New Testament studies at Whitley College, suggest that to understand the letter to the Romans properly we really need to read it backwards. We need to read these later chapters first so that from Paul's comments on the local situation we can get a feel for what it is that all the earlier chapters are being directed towards.

So let me describe the scene for you, because without it, it will make very little sense to us when he starts talking about things like the rights and wrongs of vegetarianism. In the church in Rome, there was a problem over the extent to which certain traditional religious practices laid down in the scriptures were binding on the modern Roman Christians.

It is probably over simplistic to see these as disputes over whether being Christian means being Jewish. That was certainly the issue addressed in some of Paul's other letters, but in the church at Rome it appears that there were Jews and Gentiles on both sides, even though the particular practices at stake arose from obedience to the Jewish scriptures.

There is a bit of Roman history that probably fed into this dispute and exacerbated it too. About five or six years before Paul wrote this letter, the Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jewish population from the city of Rome. That would have meant that many of the Christians, being Jewish, would have gone, and that most likely included many of the founding figures of the church there. Then when Claudius was replaced by the Emperor Nero, the Jews came back.

I don't know if you've ever been in a church where the founders come home after some years away, and they are NOT happy. The church in Rome has had five years of flourishing development without any traditional Jewish influence. To those reared on the strict moral and ritual purity codes of Judaism, the church they now find in Rome looks to have sold out. It seems as though there are no moral standards any more; as though the Christians are now totally compromised with the pagan society around them.

When Paul talks about whether people eat meat or not, it has got nothing to do with today's issues over whether vegetarianism is healthier, more respectful of all living creatures, or more

ecologically sustainable. It is a religious issue. Virtually all the meat available in the markets in Rome came from the Pagan temples. In the temple an animal was slaughtered on the altar as an offering to the gods, and then it was carted out the back, butchered and sold in the markets. Whether to eat it then becomes a religious question. Can you eat meat that has been dedicated to a pagan god?

In cities where the Jewish community was large enough, they set up their own network of abattoirs and butchers so they could get meat that had not been through the pagan temple system, but there has been no Jewish community in Rome for five years. The only way to avoid meat that has been dedicated to pagan gods was to avoid meat completely. So when Paul characterises the two factions as those who think it is okay to eat anything, and those who eat only vegetables, it is a thoroughly religious dispute. One group say, "What's the big deal. Pagan gods are nothing, so all meat is the same." The other group says, "We have to be strong on this. We can't compromise our standards and have anything to do with pagan worship. We have to draw the line and keep ourselves separate from anything associated with spiritual evil. And besides the Bible is clear on this."

Undoubtedly, the latter group saw themselves as the 'strong'. They were taking a strong, hard-line stand. It was the meat eaters who were being soft and lax and compromising and who needed to shape up. So the strong hard liners would have got a rude shock when they got up to this point in the letter and found Paul calling them the 'weak'!

Can you hear this scenario being played out today? We hear plenty of Christians taking a strong moral stand on this, that, or the other thing. They draw lines in the sand and hold firm for traditional values as they see them spelt out in the Bible. They take a strong stand against the ordination of women. Or they take a strong stand against making divorce easier to obtain. Or they take a strong stand against allowing homosexual people to hold any positions of responsibility in church or society. Or they take a strong stand against displaying Aboriginal artwork in the church because it represents a pagan religious worldview. And can you hear their shock and outrage if the Apostle Paul were to turn up and describe them as the 'weak' in front of the 'strong' who seem to have a weak position on these things?

But that is exactly what Paul is saying. In his day Paul was an outrageously controversial advocate of Christian freedom. His argument in a nutshell is this. No one can follow enough rules to get into the good books with God by their own hard work. The only way into the good books with God is by putting your trust in Jesus and letting him sort it out for you. If you are putting your trust in Jesus, then you don't have to worry about a bunch of rules, even if they're in the Bible. You simply do as Jesus did, loving God, loving others, and offering everything you do to God in gratitude for the love God has shown you. The only things you can't do are those things that conflict with loving or which you cannot do openly before God in an attitude of gratitude.

Therefore, if you follow through on Paul's logic here, the minute you get hung up on some moral issue for no other reason than the Bible says it and it is a long held traditional value, then you are actually failing in your confidence in Jesus Christ's ability to sort everything out. Paul sees this as weak, as timid, as trying to cover your bases just in case trusting Jesus is not enough. So while meat being offered to idols is not likely to be an issue today, he'd still have plenty to say. Perhaps:

“Some homosexual Christians believe that it is okay to enter into a loving sexually-intimate relationship with a partner of the same sex, while the weak play it safe and advocate celibacy. Those who make love do so in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God, and it is to God they will answer not to you, and they will be upheld because the Lord is able to put everybody right.”

To those who were adamant that eating meat offered to idols was an abomination, saying that another Christian might eat it in honour of the Lord would have been every bit as shocking as it would be to tell today's religious anti-gay lobby that a Christian could engage in gay lovemaking in honour of the Lord, but if you follow Paul's line of reasoning, that is absolutely consistent.

Now it would be easy for us here to stop at this point, and bask in a bit of self-congratulation, because the sorts of policies we have adopted on a number of moral issues and for which we have sometimes been criticised as too liberal and morally loose, appear to be the sorts of issues on which Paul would describe us as the strong and our critics as the weak. And of course I find it very tempting to do that. But if we did that, we'd be missing the whole point of this passage, and probably the whole point of the letter to the Romans. You see there is a sting in the tail for both sides in this passage.

Paul says:

“Don't put anyone down for being timid in their faith. Welcome them into the congregation, and don't give them a hard time for being hung up about things that cause you no concern. You who are strong must not make fun of those who play it safe; for the fact is that God has extended a welcome to them too, and the Lord is quite capable of getting them to stand where they should without your help.”

In using his language about the strong and the weak, Paul is not afraid to nail his colours to the mast over which side he thinks has better understood the implications of the knowledge that we are put right with God solely through putting our trust in Jesus. He clearly thinks that to cling to the Bible as a rule book that must be carefully followed to avoid moral error is a sign of weakness, a sign of insecurity, of a timid faith. He would rather have us read it as a love letter from God that inspires us to live boldly, freely, generously, passionately.

But he is absolutely adamant that our acceptance of one another and our willingness to acknowledge one another's sincerity and to break bread together around the one table are of far far more importance than sorting out who is right and wrong on questions of scripture and morality. He thunders “Who do you think you are?” just as vehemently to those of us who are inclined to look down our noses at the fundamentalists and moralists and make fun of their stance, as he does to those who would judge us as sliding down the slippery slope to hell for ours.

This is a bit tough to swallow for some of us. Especially for those of us who have been the divorcees or the gays or the women called to pastoral ministry who have so often been the targets of sanctimonious hostility and vilification. It is especially acute for our LGBTI sisters and brothers at present as they endure the indignity of having the rest of the community spend several months publicly making judgements about how they can and can't live. At times it can be pretty hard for those of us who have been on the front line of denominational debates on these issues and who have been accused in public of being part of a demonic conspiracy.

Humouring those who attacked us has often been a survival technique, a way of keeping ourselves from succumbing to the temptation to return fire and become bitter and hostile.

But Paul is clear. The fact that they may not have understood the implications of justification by faith doesn't mean that they haven't been accepted by God on the basis of their faith. And if God has accepted both them and us into the body of Christ, then if we've got an argument over whether they should be there, it is with God, not them.

When we come to the Table and offer one another an expression of peace, we'd better be ready to offer it for real to anyone who has responded to God's gracious invitation to the table, whether we see eye to eye on how to behave tomorrow or not. And it is no use hiding behind the fact that those who think we are in league with the devil probably won't want to come to the table with us, so we won't have to deal with whether or not we can accept them.

I'm sure Paul would say to us;

“Well you just make sure that you are not doing anything that is contributing to the breach, and that if one day they do turn up, they won't feel a cold shoulder or a sarcastic smile, but that you'd be ready to welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ and give thanks to God with them and for them.”

The Table that we are gathered around here is not our table. It is the Table of the Lord; of Jesus the Messiah. At this table Jesus offers himself to all of us, whether we have understood the implications of his grace for scripture and ethics or whether we haven't. When we gather here to give thanks to God and to eat and drink in honour of the Lord, we do so in union with all God's people and in order that we may be drawn more deeply into communion with all God's people, even with those who we don't agree with and who may be hostile to our understanding of Christian living and ethics. But if we allow their attitude to us to become an excuse for making them feel unwelcome at this table, then we are failing to discern and honour the unity of the body of Christ and we are making a mockery of our own prayers. In extravagant generosity, Christ gives himself to us and releases us from an unimaginable debt, and at this table we not only pour out our gratitude for that freedom, but we commit ourselves to treating all others with the same reckless generosity and mercy.