

10.30am Homily Trinity XV 2023

Rom 14:1-12

“Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds . . .”

These are the words St Paul uses when advising the early Roman church about their disagreements.

They seem to have disagreed about two areas of thought and practice: food and calendars. I was vegetarian for ten years, so I take slight umbrage with Paul’s statement that the weak eat only vegetables!

But Paul is quite clear that both carnivores and vegetarians are welcome in the church family. This is something Christian can legitimately disagree on, using their consciences, and still live well together.

Likewise with calendars. Some of the Roman Christians feel very strongly about keeping times of fasting and prayer, likely in accordance with the Jewish year; while others are more relaxed.

Again, Paul simply reminds them all that they can do either to God’s glory; and that, one way or another, God (and not humans) will decide what was right in that context.

Way back at the start of the Christian story, Paul seems to view some things as essential teachings and others are matters best left to individuals or communities to decide. Remember that in Romans, St Paul sets out his great vision of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what it means for humanity and the whole cosmos.

It’s this grand story that matters to Paul, but when it comes to the details of daily practice, he allows for discernment. In short, it’s up to the Roman Christians of the first century what they do or don’t do on holy days, and what food they eat, so long as they remember that it’s all done with and for Jesus.

I find this refreshing. If you read papers, magazines or social media, you will be told each day what the recipe for success is. Drink this new healthy concoction, do these exercises, invest in this, breathe and meditate this way for hours each day, and you will flourish.

Despite our great freedom, we all seem convinced that our way is the best way. And people are trying to tell us, sell us, the idea that if we adopt a particular practice it will solve our problems. Here Paul could say, do it or don’t, find what suits you – but remember to glorify God. We can use our conscience, our inner voice, our centre of moral decision-making to guide us, aided by prayer and the presence of God’s Holy Spirit.

But things are not always so simple. Because, just to complicate things, Christians don’t always agree on *which things* are settled teachings, and which can be left to individuals or churches to decide. In fact, that’s almost the whole story of Christianity, with different traditions and sects dividing because x thing was held to be essential by one, and not others

And what one group considers a matter of conscience, another may think essential. It’s confusing. We might want to throw our arms in the air and give up, but that would only be ignoring the decisions we have to make each week about what’s right and what’s wrong.

I want to take you on a very brief journey this morning. I'm not asking you to walk anywhere, but I just want to take you on a historical journey through some of the things different generations of Christians have believed. Things that they believed were obvious, and perhaps even essential parts of the faith, which we now no longer take seriously. Some of these you will find amusing, and some disturbing.

- (1) Way back in St Paul's time, there was a disagreement in the church. Some people believed that when people who weren't Jewish (Gentiles, like us) started following Jesus, they should adopt the Jewish laws about food and holy days. This seemed obvious to them. Jesus was a Jewish man who proclaimed himself the Messiah of the Jewish God, who himself had followed the commandments.

But there were some radical innovators who disagreed with this completely. Paul and his followers said that because the message of Jesus was actually for everyone, and it was a free gift from God, non-Jews shouldn't need to adopt Jewish practices. One group thought that something was essential (following food laws) and another thought it was a matter of conscience or wider teaching.

Eventually, the Council of Jerusalem hammered out a compromise solution – you can read about this in Acts 15. But we know how the story ultimately worked out. Within a century, the vast majority of Christians all over the known world were Gentiles who didn't follow food laws. Development won out. God had used the spiritual lives of Paul and his followers to grow the church beyond its former boundaries.

Nowadays, very few Christians believe that we should all keep kosher or follow the Jewish calendar, so our beliefs have evolved on this topic; and what seemed self-evident in Jerusalem in the first century would now seem absurd if we were to revive it.

- (2) Skipping forward a century or two, I take you to the great Origen. Origen was a highly educated Christian, probably the first true Christian philosopher or theologian. While reading the Bible, he created the Christian ideas we now take for granted like the Incarnation and the Trinity.

But he also had some views we'd find strange! Origen believed that the sun, moon and stars had souls (PA 1, 7.3). He thought that they were heavenly beings who had been subjected by God to serve fallen humanity, by being given physical forms (rock or gas!) and made to give us light. For this, he had completely reasonable grounds such as the Psalms talking about the Sun as a bridegroom, and Paul himself saying that the creation groans with eager longing.

We might find this idea quaint and charming! It might remind us of St Francis talking about Brother Sun; and we might say, leave it to conscience! If someone wants to believe the sun has a soul, let them.

But later Christians didn't see it this way. They thought it was a dangerous idea, and not one left to individuals to decide. It was condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 543:

If anyone says that the heaven, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the waters that are above the heavens, have souls, and are reasonable beings, let him be anathema.

What seemed reasonable to Origen in the third century was outrageous to medieval Christians. And of course, with our modern scientific cosmology we'd find an ensouled sun and moon laughable. Again here, what was

considered essential has shifted. We might find it a curious idea, but we wouldn't say someone who held this belief had stopped being Christian.

(3) A more serious note now, and another fast-forward to the Middle Ages. I take you to Thomas Aquinas, the greatest medieval Catholic theologian. By modern standards, he and all his fellow thinkers were terrible misogynists. Like all male Christian thinkers before the modern age, Aquinas thought women naturally inferior to men.

He said: "woman is naturally inferior to man" because in men "rationality predominates" (ST q.92, a.1, Obj.2). He also says that "in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature."

Shocking stuff, to us. This belief has been widely abandoned by even the most conservative of Christians. It is no longer the official teaching of the Catholic church. And even when Christians argue for male authority, they rarely invoke the idea of women being inferior. Rather, "equal but different" is the watchword.

This teaching, for Aquinas and many other Christians throughout the ages, seemed essential and not a matter of conscience. It was self-evident to them that women were inferior. Now we know this isn't true, from direct experience, as well observing the incredible sporting, intellectual and political achievements of women. A big change has taken place, and now we almost all see men and women as equally bearing the image of God.

I could cite many changes in the way Christians view the world. I haven't even touched on slavery (formerly ok, now considered universally wrong) or the charging of financial interest (formerly universally wrong but now ok!) . . .

The truth is that not only have Christian teachings shifted, changed and developed over the centuries, but also what has been considered essential and open to debate has also changed.

Some of the ideas I've mentioned seem so offensive or ridiculous to us, but the Christians who believed them read the same Bible and prayed to the same God as we do. They were not mad or bad, just different: responding to a different time and place.

Part of the strength of Christianity is that it is a living tradition. Jesus promised his disciples that the Spirit *would lead them into all truth*. This journey of truth-discovery has unfolded over the many generations of church life and will continue in the future.

My message today is: this is ok. The sky hasn't fallen in because our consciences shape our beliefs. Who Jesus is, his life, death and resurrection, *hasn't changed*. And our understanding of the core doctrines of the faith is much deeper and fuller than it was 2000 years ago. In each new generation, the prism of Christ's light shines through at a new angle, revealing some new colour, some new beauty. In each generation, careful sifting and discerning has to be done as the gospel interacts with new discoveries.

Now today there are, sadly, some Christians who cannot appreciate this living tradition. You might hear people claim that their church follows *exactly or only* the Bible, or that Christians who think things through more deeply are traitors, or heretics, or any other number of bad things.

But friends, this isn't true. God always intended the gospel to be about the reality of the living Christ and not a static reading of one set of texts. To those who claim to follow only the Bible, we must say: whose? Paul's, Origen's, Aquinas's? Or ours, in this time and place; listening to the Spirit and all that has been taught by the saints, but recognising that in our turn we have to decide what to do.

And when it comes to the controversial issues of our time, reactions can be equally hysterical, not taking account of history. Christians' views on sexuality, gender, human nature, ethics and so on *will grow and adapt* as history moves forward.

What God will judge them on is, as St Paul indicates, their faithfulness to the Lord; and whether they are rooted in that great mystery of Jesus Christ. It will be, as Paul reminds the Romans, *up to the Lord* to decide who got things right and not for Christians to throw accusations at one another. We are all trying to discern honestly.

In the century to come, we may have to wrestle with all sorts of questions. Should we use technology to interfere with the global climate to cool the earth? Are artificial intelligences alive, and if so who created them? Will we share the Christian message with creatures from other planets? The answers we give may seem obvious to us, and weird or impossible to Christians in the past or future. That is ok. We can only do what is possible for us.

In all this, as the great Anglican theologian Ken Leech says, ***the orthodox will often be the innovators and not the conservatives.***

It will be those who are alive in the present, prayerfully alert and responding to the present moment saturated in God's presence, who may offer the world the vision of Christ's love it so sorely needs. May we play our part in that great movement.

In the name of the Father . . .