

Its hard to know where to start today. As I wrote this it had just been announced that we can now only meet socially in groups of 6. But again as I was writing it was clarified that that this did not mean the closure of churches. So there was a little doubt in my mind whether we would be here or not but at least for now some of us are.

But even if we are back its still not going to be normal for quite some time

The face masks, the one way system, the lack of singing – its church, but not as we know it. And Some of us still need or prefer to be at home. . For now though , whether we are in the building, at home, or somewhere else we all take comfort in the fact that wherever we are we are still All Saints Totley – we are still performing collective worship as indeed we have been these last months. Just because we have not been physically here we have still worshipped and prayed together and continue to do so.

One good thing that will carry on from our online services is that we agreed we should keep the talks shorter – as they have been online so I know that you will all be grateful for that!

This morning I've chosen to talk about the Epistle reading from the lectionary – Romans 14 v1 to 12 and this is a passage that really struck a chord with me as it is all about judging other people and in particular the way they do church And this resonates with me– both because I sometimes struggle with the differences between denominations (I work in a Catholic school and sometimes some of the practices there wind me up) and because judging in general is something I try desperately not to do but find myself doing it quite often. Passing comment on others is after all a bit of a human sport – another one of our standard failings I think.

So In this passage Paul is writing to the Romans at a time when Christianity is beginning to reach many different types of people. On the one hand there were those used to Religion and the practicing of a law based faith – the Jews particularly were used to living by many rules (and following them to the letter) whereas Gentiles were not. Also some had converted from Pagan based beliefs and so again came from different belief sets, and perhaps showed their faith in different ways. Paul is addressing the fact that different people can and do worship God differently and can, and do, believe that some things should be avoided or done in a certain way.

Before I go on any further its important to put what Paul says in this Chapter in the context of the rest of his letter and more importantly what he has taken about prior to this. Paul essentially has been talking about how we should love one another. Back in Chapter 12 he told us that Love should be a serving love – that we are given gifts to use in the service of others, and that love must be Real – it must be genuine. Then in Chapter 13 Paul explains that Love must be universal – we must love everyone – no exceptions.

So as we come to Chapter 14 Paul addresses the thorny issue of how we are to deal with those who worship differently to us or hold slightly different beliefs to us – that we must be tolerant of other people's views. Paul tells us straight off in Verse 1 – “Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters”.

By the way when I say “those who hold slightly different beliefs to us” I don’t mean the fundamental stuff like whether you believe in Jesus or not, I mean those that have slightly different beliefs, a classic example of course would be the drinking of alcohol ... Some denominations frown on alcohol completely whereas we in the Church of England probably work better in the pub! – Certainly pub based meetings are much more enjoyable and they feel more productive even if they really are not. However there are plenty of denominations that have a different view entirely on alcohol. I knew a youth worker once who although he was plenty old enough to drink dare not even have a glass of wine with his meal in the town where he worked for fear of the disapproval if he was seen by anyone in his church.

And this is what Paul means in V1 – “Disputable Matters” as he terms them, are the things which are not explicitly defined in the bible or can be argued one way or the other. The Bible does not tell us HOW to worship God, but it does tell us in what spirit we should worship and that is the essence of this part of Paul’s letter. If we are doing what we do in faith (ie in the right way) then we should not be judged by others who are also doing their best to worship in faith. Only God can judge whether the way we exercise our faith is right in these “disputable matters”. Paul gives us an example – V2 “One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, another only eats vegetables” He says in V3 quite clearly that the one who eats everything must not treat the other with contempt nor should the one who doesn’t eat meat judge the one who does. He uses the master and servant analogy we know well to explain our relationship with God: he explains that we are all servants and only the Master can judge his Servants.

This idea of not condemning others for what they ate was actually a real problem in the early church – Jews for example didn’t eat Pork and other meats had to be kosher so a converted Jew had problems eating meat, Then in Rome as in other places most meat was offered to idols by the butchers that prepared it so some said that if you ate that meat it was just as if you worshipped that idol whereas some Christians just ate it because they knew that the idols didn’t exist in the first place. As with most things there was the liberal view, that it was perfectly alright to eat the meat and the stricter viewpoint that said it was wrong. And of course wherever there are two or more viewpoints arguments occur.

We are not talking here about big stuff – we are pretty clear that we are commanded not to Murder and we are even clearer that Jesus has explained to us that the Spirit of the Law means we should not harm someone - here we are talking about procedural stuff as well as personal stuff that can be interpreted one way or another, much of which doesn’t affect anyone else. BUT we are still often liable to look at that person and say “OO that’s wrong” We might even say “Well I wouldn’t do it that way” in that sly “I’m not judging, but I am judging” kind of way. And although we are not talking big stuff we are talking about things that have the power to divide us if we let them.

By and large the Church of England bumps along just fine but it contains people with such a broad selection of viewpoints that these differences are often very apparent and if we are

honest the way we handle those differences doesn't always suggest to people in the wider community that we Christians all love each other.

And churches themselves often fall towards the legalistic view of things and either make or imply artificial standards . Ray Stedman, the great American evangelist, suggested that this has given rise to a tremendous distortion of Christianity in the eyes of the world – the idea that Christianity is a “do not do” something religion – a “Don't” religion. He suggested that this distorts the true freedom that is the message of the Gospel and can leave us with the sense that Christianity is just a set of rules to be followed.

Paul leaves us in no doubt that changing others is not our responsibility v4 “Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls, and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand”

Paul is saying more than that its none of our business he is also saying that the Lord can straighten out this person if he needs it “The Lord Is able to make him stand” ie if he isn't doing so great God alone will help him. The Mesasge translates this as “If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learnt, God can handle that without your help”

Next, Paul reminds us in v5-8 that God knows every heart and he sees what we can't – God knows if what we do or say is sincere and meant in the right spirit . He reminds us that whether we choose to consider a certain day special or choose to eat or fast in a certain way as long as a person has an honest conviction through prayer and scripture (rather than just doing something out of tradition)that it is the right thing to do God will see that. In V7-8 Paul reminds us that our relationship with one another is more important than our lifestyle – basically he is saying there whether we live or dies is not the important thing – the important thing is that we belong to the Lord – we are not servants of each other, we are brothers and sisters, we are only servants of God and only he has the right to change us.

In the last part of todays passage V9 onwards reminds us that Christ alone has the ability to judge us so Paul says stop trying to take his place – why do you try to play Christ in the Church? Why do you think you can judge - say what is right and how others should be behave. The others are your brothers and Sisters and we must all equally stand before God to be judged.

Paul's advice is simple. Stop playing God – stop trying to do what only Christ can do, stop judging what others do. Sooner or later we will all be judged but that does not give us the right to judge others now , in this life.

Its really easy to miss the real faith of somone because we are too busy noticing the little things they do that we wouldn't do like that - its probably just as much a problem among Christians now as it was back then in the early Roman Church.

At the end of the day the fact that we shouldn't judge in any respect is pretty clear . Jesus told us not to as it says in Matthew 7:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.