

Romans 14:1-12

At first sight, our reading from Romans is rather strange. It feels almost derogatory to be referring to some people within the church in Rome as weak. We wouldn't usually talk about people within the life of our own church as that – not least because pride can come before a fall. So, what is so important here?

If you look again, Paul talks about people who are weak *in faith*. And then he goes on to talk about them as people who only eat vegetables (rather wonderfully translated herbs in the Authorised Version!) However, all that has gone before should alert us to the fact that this is not a discussion of vegetarianism. Paul is addressing an issue of belief and faith.

We already know that Paul has been trying to reconcile belief for people of a Jewish heritage and Gentiles. He's explained to his readers that this new understanding is compatible with his Jewish heritage and origins. He has explained how the rigours and requirements of the Jewish law no longer need to be applied with diligence because of his new-found freedom in Christ.

That is the issue being discussed here. It suggests that some people were simply eating vegetable to avoid eating meat that might not have prepared according to Jewish practise, or worse had been offered to idols. Others regarded this as unimportant, confident in their new-found freedom in Christ. This seems to have caused tension (v.3) Likewise observing the Sabbath (or not) has also caused tensions (vv. 5-6).

Paul is prepared to call people who still look back to the regulations of the Jewish Law as "weak in faith" because he believes that they are putting their trust in Christ and their continued observance of rules. However, he makes it clear to those who he might otherwise speak of as "strong" that their downfall would be to despise their brothers and sisters who still abstain or keep a Sabbath.

Jewish diet & Sabbath laws were hugely important by this time. One of the ways the Jewish community had maintained its identity under various kinds of occupation was to become more scrupulous in observing these traditions. Once you have no homeland and no kingdom, and for quite a period no functioning Temple, then these practises were how you marked yourself out as Jew. And in the time between the Old Testament and the New, the Jewish people endured great persecution to keep those traditions. So again, Paul wants to affirm his new understanding, but respect people who were struggling to leave this incredibly powerful identity and heritage behind.

That sort of division should look familiar to us. How do you keep together people who embrace innovation and those who value tradition? How do you deal with debates in the church about the role of women, human sexuality and all kinds of other hot potatoes? How do you keep the peace between people who differ in the way they behave and practise their faith?

I think Paul spells out some principles here that could be helpful:

- Do not despise. It's very easy for disagreements to lapse into abuse. Occasionally I have heard on the radio interviews with long-retired politicians, who seem to be able to have a conversation about issues in a much more respectful way than their colleagues in the thick of it. And recently, it feels like it has got worse – at least with some. Do not despise or pass judgment, says Paul – even though he would agree with the strong that abstaining and being scrupulous about the Sabbath is unnecessary. The message is to respect and understand, not abuse.
- Remember what is in common. Both the so-called weak and their stronger brothers and sisters are people who honour the Lord and give him thanks. They worship the same God, they follow the same Jesus, and they belong to him. There are things much more important in common, than the things which divide.
- We are all accountable for our actions, but we are not each other's judges. Rather, we are all accountable to God. The issues which are causing dispute in the Roman church are not ones of real substance, or of church discipline, and the way to get perspective on that is to remember that we are all under God, says Paul. Let God worry about whether there is a serious and real problem or not.

So, this isn't a passage to help you decide whether to buy Linda McCartney sausages or free range pork ones. Instead, it's a reminder from Paul to respect one another, to understand each other's stories and why some things are important to some and not to others. And it's a reminder that the things that unite us in our faith are usually far much more important than things which often divide us.

Amen.