

Materials for Virtual Worship

Sunday 13 September Trinity 14

Collects for 14th Sunday After Trinity

Almighty God,
whose only Son has opened for us
a new and living way into your presence:
give us pure hearts and steadfast wills
to worship you in spirit and in truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

(or)

Merciful God,
your Son came to save us
and bore our sins on the cross:
may we trust in your mercy
and know your love,
rejoicing in the righteousness
that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Readings

Letter to the Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 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.

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Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew's Gospel 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children, to pay his debt. He fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And

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out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' Amen

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Proper 19 A. Romans 14.1-12 'Welcome one another'

In the news on Thursday – the Citizens' Assembly recommendations about combatting global warming recommend a 20 – 40% reduction in meat consumption. Some go further in their own lives, and are cutting out meat altogether

So – what has the Bible to say about vegetarianism?

I bet you've never heard a sermon about this topic before, have you? But there it is, on the page in our reading from Romans – '*Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables*' (Romans 14.2). On the face of it, it seems that St Paul considers vegetarianism a weakness, so you might think the Bible is condemning this stance in life; but read on a bit further, '*those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God: while*

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those who abstain abstain in honour of the Lord, and give thanks to God.' (v.6). Christians of both viewpoints, Paul says, 'give honour to God'. And giving honour has a lot to do with being thankful with an honest heart.

Paul, I think we can assume, was a meat eater – but he doesn't want to quarrel with those who aren't; but nor does he want them to judge him. He wants to acknowledge that the conscientious decisions which Christians make – however sharply they differ from each other – give honour to God.

Is he embracing diversity here because the issue of what people eat wasn't important - nothing more than a 'fad'?

No, that wasn't the case for Christians in the first century church, just as it isn't nowadays. Vegetarianism was what we might call a 'hot button topic' among those Christians, because it stemmed from religious considerations. So, it would have been easy, even natural, for one side or another in this debate to say that the other group weren't 'real Christians'.

Why were people vegetarians in the first century Church: not for the reasons that people are today. It might have been because they had a Jewish background, and they continued to think it important to keep the Jewish Law in order to honour God and be a real Christian. Vegetarianism might have seemed an easy way to keep kosher in the mixed society and markets of Rome, where the commonest meat available was pork.

I guess most of us know how much time and energy Paul spent on standing up *against* the view that faith in Christ should involve everyone in embracing the laws and practices of Judaism. He was very vehement in maintaining that faith in Christ was something else – a radical trust and surrender, the circumcision 'of the heart' rather than of the flesh, a faith which was inward, not outward; an

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inclusive church in which Gentiles and Jews were on an equal footing, and should eat together and welcome one another, irrespective of Jewish food laws. All this might lead us to suppose that he would be equally vehement in condemning vegetarianism as a way of remaining kosher as showing lack of faith and inclusiveness. He might have demanded, instead that Jewish believers should abandon their former lifestyle. and simply eat anything in order to prove how radically they believed in Christ. Perhaps there's a hint that his thinking *tended* this way in his use of the word 'weak' to describe those who subscribed to vegetarianism. But still – he did not go the whole hog (if you'll excuse the maybe unfortunate cliché); he didn't write off scrupulous vegetarians as pseudo-Christians. Instead, he said that in their conscientious choice they 'honoured God' as they gave him thanks.

Another reason for vegetarianism among Christians was anxiety about the source of the meat in the common markets: a lot of it came as the overspill from sacrifices in pagan temples. New Christians, of any background, might naturally have wanted to be clear in their own minds that they weren't participating in sacrifices to false gods by eating their residue. Paul tackled this side of the issue when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 10.23-33). Again, it looks as though Paul saw it as a sign of a strong faith to eat whatever was sold in the market without question or anxiety, because Christians should know that pagan gods are nothing, and have no power or influence over human life. But nevertheless, he also wanted to set his discussion in the context of thinking about what's good for other people – believers or unbelievers – in the choices you make. There are times when it's right to hold back, so as not to scandalise someone else. Faith isn't to be a macho display that you're not worried about scruples, your own or other people's, because you know you're free in Jesus. The passage in 1 Corinthians 10 is very interesting discussion – I recommend you read it. And, most significantly, Paul ends it with the

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same principle he used in Romans: you honour God when you can truly give thanks to God with a clear conscience, in what you choose to do.

Now, is this sermon really all about vegetarianism? It's a hot topic today, and worth giving serious thought to, but as we know, people's reasons for choosing vegetarianism have moved on. Whether it's because of the cruelty of intensive farming, or because of the huge environmental impact of devoting so much of agriculture to producing animal feeds, many people are conscientiously embracing it today, but not for the kind of religious reasons which influenced Christians in the first century.. And, as we know, some people are quite 'evangelical' about vegetarianism or veganism. But on the whole, although we may differ about this topic in the church nobody tends to make it a 'make or break' issue as to whether someone has true faith.

So, this reflection goes wider than just being about vegetarianism. It's illustrating the point Michael made in his sermon 3 weeks ago, that Christianity is a matter of faith – not ethics, and we should clearly understand that. This isn't to say we don't have to strive to be ethical, to determine what's right and to do it; we should also feel free to argue our why we reach our conclusions strongly with other people, and in the church community, too. But I think such passionate, but reasoned, argument is different from the quarrelling Paul was telling the Romans not to engage in. What they were doing was judging each other's faith and relationship with God on the basis of their ethical differences - forgetting that we have no right to judge the servants of another: each of us is accountable to God alone (v.4).

I think we're used to accepting that people with strongly held political differences can still be fellow-Christians. In Parliament, members of different parties, who may attack each other's

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philosophy and policies as deeply mistaken, still find it possible to meet together to pray. But in church life there are other hot button issues which people treat as the litmus test of whether someone should be 'in' or be 'out'. High among these come all those controversial issues concerning sex and gender- identity, as well as issues concerning life itself – abortion and euthanasia, for example. People feel strongly about these things. I know that I do. When we feel strongly, we naturally reach for the Bible to validate our ethical beliefs. Indeed, we may with complete integrity be convinced that those ethical beliefs come from the proper interpretation of Scripture. But is this to say that our strong ethical convictions are the same thing as faith itself? –Faith in Jesus, faith in the Lord before whom we do, and will, stand as his servants and disciples? As Paul wrote, '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.' (v.5)

Of course, we know that Paul did write to some of the Christians he'd converted, in 1 Corinthians, for example, about kinds of immorality which should lead to someone being excluded from the church. He held there were limits to diversity; but I think that he was describing situations in which it would be almost impossible for someone to be acting with a clear conscience and thankfulness to the Lord. So, to say that the Paul taught that we should live within a church where we may deeply disagree over ethics is not at all to say that he– or the Scriptures generally – suggest that 'anything goes' in the life of faith. Christians are not libertines. Sin exists – we certainly believe that. The idolatry of the heart is a reality. Constantly reminding ourselves that we are accountable to God is very necessary in guiding our thoughts and actions. But we can still live with each other when our conscientious conclusions about what's right disagree.

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This understanding allows for what's called 'good disagreement' – something the current Archbishop of Canterbury has worked hard to promote within the Church of England and the Anglican Communion; good disagreement, in which we can still 'walk together' as people with the same fundamental faith in the redeeming love of Christ. I hope we can embrace 'good disagreement' as a principle in our own little parish community.

Finally, a little coda on the subject of how those who some might see as weak in faith because of their scruples can end up bringing strength to God's family. In 1948 when the Church of South India was created out of several Christian denominations, a new liturgy was devised. It was new, but it was also old, because it drew on some of the most ancient traditions of the church which had become forgotten over the centuries. Among them was the practice that the priest at the eucharist should stand behind the altar, facing the people – that is, westward facing. (Probably there are people here who can remember back to the days when in churches like this one, the priest stood with his back to the congregation – eastward facing.) The CSI liturgy reintroduced the ancient westward facing practice before most other denominations did. In fact, it gave a lead. One of the reasons why this practice was embraced first in India was because of the scruples of worried Christians who were converted from Hinduism. They found it difficult that in an eastward facing celebration everyone faced a cross or crucifix on or behind the altar. It reminded them too much of devotions in a Hindu temple, where priest and people face the image of the god together to do reverence (or make puja). So, they were happy to do something different as Christians, and revive the westward facing practice of the earliest Christian centuries, which gives the sense much more of us being the family of God, all around his table.

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You could have called the scruples of those Hindu converts to Christianity a weakness in faith – a fear of being swept back into old ways; but in fact, it contributed through the CSI to a reform which eventually touched nearly all the churches of the West, both Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic. I think our worship is the better for it – don't you? It's a funny little story from the history of liturgy, which is a very obscure subject for most of us: I only know it because I was told it by one of the people who devised the 1948 liturgy for the Church of South India. But, obscure or not, I think it makes a point. We should welcome one another, in all our diversity, even if you think that others may be unduly influenced by 'weakness of faith. Who knows? The 'weak' ones may have something valuable to give us all!

Hymn (Gradual)

In a world where people walk in darkness

1 In a world where people walk in darkness,
let us turn our faces to the light,
to the light of God revealed in Jesus,
to the daystar scattering our night.

*For the light is stronger than the darkness
and the day will overcome the night,
though the shadows linger all around us,
let us turn our faces to the light.*

2 In a world where suffering of the helpless
casts a shadow all along the way,
let us bear the cross of Christ with gladness
and proclaim the dawning of the day.

Refrain

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- 3 Let us light a candle in the darkness,
in the face of death a sign of life;
as a sign of hope where all seemed hopeless,
as a sign of peace in place of strife.

Refrain

Robert A Willis (born 1947)
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Hymn (at Offertory)

The servant Song

- 1 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant, too.
- 2 We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.
- 3 I will hold the Christlight for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.
- 4 I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh, I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

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- 5 When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.
- 6 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant, too.

Richard Gillard (born 1953)
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Post Communion Prayer

Lord God, the source of truth and love,
keep us faithful to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
united in prayer and the breaking of bread,
and one in joy and simplicity of heart,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen