

Sunday 13th September 2020
Trinity 14 (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 50.15-21
NT: Romans 14.1-12
G: Matthew 18.21-35

I can't imagine that today's reading from Romans is a favourite among vegetarians and vegans.

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

Just like his preaching on the place of women and the acceptance of slavery, this is another example from Paul of while the essential teaching of Christianity remains ineffably true, many examples given in scripture to illustrate this have dated and distract from the point being made.

And in the bizarre way my mind works, I can't read this extract without thinking of the Royle Family Christmas special, the one where the son's, Anthony, girlfriend and parents pay a visit. For those who don't know, the Royle family was a brilliant creation of the late Caroline Ahearn, a Manchester based family with little ambition and a daily routine built around smoking and watching TV. They mean well but you wouldn't necessarily want to live with them. In the episode in question, Anthony prepares them for the visit by telling them that his girlfriend and her family are vegetarians. The amazement on their faces is wonderful.

He may as well have told them that they strip naked at sunset and worship ants, so beyond their concept is vegetarianism. The resulting panic about what to feed these guests on Christmas night begins with a suggestion of boiled ham but cut wafer thin so they'd hardly notice. If memory serves, I think in the end they are offered hard boiled eggs, whole and unadorned!

Sometimes, the ways of other people are wholly beyond our experience. Judging other people and their ways is something most of us do without necessarily realising it. I know a favourite of mine is scrutinising the contents of other people's shopping trolley as I wait in the queue for the till. You could argue that the act of judging others is a built in safety mechanism. Is this someone who will hurt me? Can I trust this person? Making judgements about people based on whether they buy white or wholemeal bread or whether they have a tendency to wear bright coloured trousers, is mostly a harmless pursuit.

Where judging becomes sinister is when we allow our prejudices, our prejudgements, to discriminate against others on the basis of characteristics such as skin colour or sexual orientation. Such judgement stops us from seeing people as individuals but brings an unfounded dislike of all people in these false categories.

While Paul is talking about judgement, Jesus is talking about forgiveness which is something very different. The work of a judge or magistrate is to determine if someone is innocent or guilty of the allegation brought against them. Forgiveness is based on knowing that someone is guilty of the offence but rather than punish, we have the strength to pardon. Forgiveness is a powerful tool, it goes against all human expectation, it is the grace of God healing our flawed humanity, reflecting the words of Jesus on the cross,

Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

Peter, speaking on our behalf, feels magnanimous, of great spirit, in offering to forgive as many as seven times.

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.

Jesus, is not suggesting a definitive number, but that we should always strive to forgive those who sin against us. His parable of the unforgiving servant reminds each one of us of our own need for forgiveness. As we pray each day Forgive us our trespasses, our sins, as we forgive those to trespass, sin, against us.

Words we blithely say without always considering their full implication. I don't think many of us are in a position to cast the first stone. All of us are in need of the mercy of God. All of us should be kind to one another, not judge a person by external factors but learn to know what they carry in their heart, ask for grace to discern the essence of the person.

Other people's actions or inactions can offend our sense of right and wrong. We can, at times, feel overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness when those who appear to do wrong seem to prosper, when lies and deceit go unchallenged. Our innate sense of justice, our right judgement, causes us to want to act to redress wrongs, to call out unfairness, to advocate for those who have no voice in such situations. Sometimes we can do these things and sometimes justice seems beyond us.

We should console ourselves that everyone, at the last, will stand alone before God and answer for their lives. We should also remind ourselves that we too will stand before God and be beholden to his mercy, his forgiveness, for what we have done or failed to do.

I do not doubt that God will be compassionate but I also believe that, just as in the parable in today's gospel, God will want to see some evidence from us that we have shown forgiveness in our lives and left the serious judging to him. Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose