

Sunday 7 July 2024
Evensong

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 20:1-11a

NT: Romans 14:1-17

I was fortunate enough to go to Cyprus in May of this year with my family. We were attending the wedding of my cousin's eldest son. The wedding was beautiful and, in the run up to the day, the Bride and Groom spent time liaising with the wedding planners and contacting the guests to establish if anyone had any food intolerances. This was not just a case of establishing likes and dislikes, but ensuring people didn't receive any food that could cause them to have a reaction. Despite this careful planning, there were some people, without allergies, who were just plain fussy and didn't eat the food that was offered. I did not fall into that category, as I love my food and thankfully, do not have any intolerances! So, trying to please everyone doesn't always work.

In our passage from Romans this evening, Paul is addressing Christians who do different things, eat different things and observe different things. As we heard last Sunday morning, St Paul was previously a zealot Jew who persecuted Christians until his conversion to becoming a follower of Jesus. Paul will have faced challenges about what to keep from his Jewish faith and what to let go of. We probably imagine that Christians in the early church all thought the same things and did the same things, however, there were differences. The important verse in this passage from Romans is verse 3:

"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".

For God has welcomed them. That is very important, it moves the focus from those who have been disagreeing over various issues to the fact that God has welcomed them. In fact, the whole chapter from Romans starts with welcome. People of faith have often argued, and it is hardly surprising given the nature of faith and belief as a conviction. It is not about the fact that people do disagree, it is about the level of respect or lack of respect that is shown to one another in this disagreement.

Paul who wrote this letter to the Romans had found freedom in his faith in Jesus. His statement:

"Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another",

is relevant not only for the Christians he was writing to, but for us, here and now today.

There are so many differences in the Church of England. Differences in how people worship, how often they receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, views on infant Baptism and same sex relationships, the list goes on.

The Church of England's General Synod is currently meeting and amongst other issues, they will be discussing Living in Love and Faith and how the Church can move forward and hold the differing views in this area. I know where I stand on this, and I am vocal in this, I firmly believe people in same sex relationships should be able to be married in church. This is what I believe, and I hope one day I can marry people in sex same relationships. There are others who do not share my view. This reading has prompted me to challenge myself to think about the kind of church we are called to be. How do we live with different beliefs and traditions within the church? How do we debate together well and with kindness? How do we welcome others as God has welcomed them? Can we ask for the grace to see with God's eyes those who believe differently from us?

Going back to my story about the family wedding in Cyprus, it wasn't possible to please everyone, despite the best efforts of the bride and groom. This resonates for us as members of the Church of England, there will always be differences and how is that managed. How can the Church of England remain united with all the different viewpoints that are held? For us, it is important to learn to disagree well with others, for God has welcomed them.

Mthr Jennifer Brady