

God welcomes all – abstain from passing judgement

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Season of Creation 3 – Pentecost + 16 – Rom 14.1-14, Matt 18.21-35

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat [meat] must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain [from meat] must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Rom 14.2-3

This is our last Sunday with Paul's letter to the Romans; a journey which we began three months ago. It's time to draw some threads together.

Paul's strange mention of vegetarianism today helps us do that. What was the issue about meat?

Again, it's because of something we've talked about for months. The Emperor Claudius expelled all Jewish people from Rome in the year 49 CE. They could only return after his death in 54 CE, trickling back cautiously. And this included kosher butchers. Restarting a business takes time. If you think what a two-year Covid lockdown did to our small businesses, imagine what five years of exile did to Rome's network of kosher butchers. Jewish Christians trickled back to rejoin their faith communities in a city where there were no kosher butchers, and probably none on the horizon.

Many Jewish Christians continued to show their loyalty to God the only way they knew; by observing Jewish laws about clean and unclean foods and holy days. Becoming Christian hadn't changed that. But now, without kosher butchers, the only way to keep food laws would have been to avoid eating meat

altogether.

Of course some, like Paul ^{v. 14}, had found freedom from those laws in following Jesus. ^{Mark 7.19} The Gentile Christians of Rome, now a majority in the church, would have seen Jewish food laws as strange; *weak*. Paul has heard of spiteful words from these *strong* ones ridiculing the 'superstition' of this *weak* kosher-observant minority.

They wouldn't have been the only ones to be ridiculed. Many gentile converts to the Way of Jesus would previously have belonged to cults where animals were sacrificed to appease pagan gods. In the way of black markets the world over, such a valuable commodity as a shrine's excess fresh meat would've quickly found its way to high street butchers and be sold as regular meat.

People knew this went on, but for some recent converts to Jesus, the thought of eating meat that may have *belonged* to their old god could have held a particular terror. So people who avoided meat for fear of breaking a taboo may also have counted among Paul's Roman vegetarians. Together with the kosher-observant converts, Paul refers to these people as *the weak in faith*.

But he doesn't say they should change. Nor should anyone try to *make* them change. Abstaining from meat was their way of honouring God; this was their integrity before God. As Paul put it, ⁵ *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.* ⁶ *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. So don't pass judgement on them; don't despise them.*

British scholar James Dunn interprets Paul to be saying in v.

5 something really lovely. Dunn writes: *Paul's point is that the strength of your conviction shouldn't intimidate anyone. We can weigh important issues before God and reach our own judgement, even if it means differing quite fundamentally with each other. Paul recognises that Christians will disagree with each other on important issues, and yet each be convinced that they are right. They can disagree and both be right [both accepted by God]. Christian truth can be expressed in a range of views and lifestyles and all be legitimate, strongly held in good faith.* ^{Romans p. 814} So we are not to judge each other's faith. Today's Gospel underlines how severely God views people passing judgement on each other.

All this ties in with some fundamental insights we've drawn from Romans over the past months. Here are some; it's not what we *do* that connects us to God; it's God's grace and broad-mindedness that does it. We're all different, but God likes diversity. Look at biodiversity if you want proof. God loves us all, as various as we are. God wants connection with us. And in Jesus, God offers gifts of friendship, acceptance, community, faith, hope and love to bind us to God and to each other. The Gospel Paul proclaims is that of the inclusive God he has found embodied in Jesus – and we're meant to become as like him as we can.

And vegetarianism? Last week, Vicky participated in a theological conference in Sydney called '*Pilgrims with the Planet*' – *coming to terms with the Anthropocene*. At dinner, she sat with a young PhD candidate who's working on animal theology. The food options were a red-meat stew or a chickpea and rice one. Her new friend had taken the chickpea option, and Vicky had taken a bob each way. She felt a bit awkward about it in front of her friend, particularly given that their chapel reading before dinner had also been Romans 14. What would this woman think of her!?

Today the tables are turned on the Rome that Paul wrote to.

Today, the *strong* Christians Paul might address would be vegetarians and vegans – people who know the cost of meat production in water consumption, deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions and in global equity. Today's *strong* people show their care for creation by abstaining from meat. That means the *weak* Christians Paul might address now are people like me; people who continue eating meat, in spite of the warnings – but ever more reluctantly.

So once again, the question – *Should I eat meat or not?* – is a critical community matter; just inverted. But the warning against judging others remains the same.

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.*

And the call to each of us to face God with integrity is likewise unchanged.

^{6b} *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.*

It's a good way to end our time with Romans; challenged head on about our discipleship by the feisty Apostle Paul. Amen.