

St. Mary's Sermons

Romans 12:9-21 & Romans 14:13-23

In my own daily readings at the moment we have been looking at the closing chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans. I think Paul could quite easily have written these chapters especially for us here at St Mary's in July 2013.

The problem with the Roman church was that it was divided; the Jewish and Gentile Christians were really struggling to live alongside each other. But as Paul rightly reminds them they had no choice but to make it work: they were interdependent parts of the same body and together they represented Christ to the world. Since the church is still made up of human beings today, it is inevitable that at times we still struggle to get along. Paul's words of advice here are just as pertinent as they were when he first wrote them. He does not beat about the bush. For Paul the bottom line is that we must choose love. He knew it was love that held the church together and he was adamant that we must do everything within our power to love every member of the church whether they love us in return or not.

I make no apology, this morning, for quoting from these bible notes at some length because they are just so relevant to us today, and I can't possibly improve on them. Paul cuts through the legalistic ins and outs of the issues faced by the early church with some enduring principles because he is concerned that the body of Christ be united, and that younger Christians be encouraged to grow. He states: It is more important to be loving than to be correct. Don't nit-pick over the small stuff; focus on the bigger picture of righteous joy. Behave in a way that won't undermine anyone else's spiritual growth, even if it means sacrificing some of your freedoms. Having spent 13 chapters clarifying what is true about God and his plan, Paul now appears to be saying something quite radical: on many issues in Christian living, being right is less important than being considerate!

This is not to suggest that Christian faith is about being polite or avoiding conflict - Paul was not afraid to speak the truth! Nor is it to offer a pain-free way around difficult decisions and debates amongst Christians. But it is to say that we can never separate our discussions of what is right and wrong from the

impact of that discussion on others. Too many people have walked away from faith and the church because they feel condemned for asking questions or differing in their views on what are, often, disputable matters. Paul is not saying that the truth is unimportant or ambiguous. Rather, it is rooted in a conviction about God's unique position as a just judge. In this sense, his concerns about relations in the body match those about relations with outsiders; it is God who will judge and repay (Romans 12:19).

I have been very disappointed and saddened by **some** of the responses I've heard to discussions that we having concerning the bread or wafer issue. As I have sought the lord in prayer about this, what has come into very sharp focus, for me, is that this response is typical of a much deeper underlying issue; an issue that I have been aware of for some time, and one which I have attempted to address several times before - that is, there are a few member of the church, and it is a few members of the church, who have acted in a critical, un-loving judgemental way towards other members of the church which has lead to divisions and broken relationships between both individuals and a couple of families. This affects the whole church and is preventing blessing and growth.

It seems to me that the devil is using this tactic to try and spoil the many, many good things that are going on in our fellowship and to try and prevent us from receiving the blessings that God has in store for us. Someone recently gave me 1Peter 5:5: *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking for someone to devour. Resist him standing firm in the faith"*. I shared this verse at the recent prayer and praise.

Please don't get me wrong, it's not all bad news this morning. I am also aware of some outstanding examples of self sacrificial, long term, practical love that members of this church carry out, both for other member of the church or in the community, without wishing to draw attention to what they are doing. This serves as a good example of what we all should be doing.

It seems to me that there is something very wrong if we cannot even love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. What chances have we of loving those outside the church? In September we will be having our seed scattering weekend when, we hope, that lots of people who are not currently church members will be visiting us. How do you think these new people will react if they become aware of our divisions? How will we cope if other people, not being from a church background and not aware of how they are expected to behave in church join our fellowship and upset our traditions? I believe that God has brought this to our attention now so that we can deal with it prior to the seed scattering event.

When I was in Darlaston, the reader had set up a youth club. Most of the young people who came had no connection with the church. Di got involved, raised some money and we took these teenagers to a CYFA Venture. Very slowly we began to get them to come to church until, one week, one of the youngsters came into church wearing a cap. A member of the church told him to take his cap off, and that was the last time he ever came to church. What really annoyed me was the same lady was always passing the polo's around the choir when it came to the sermon! It is nearly always the case that those who are critical of others are hypocrites because they refuse to address their own faults. As Jesus said to the religious leaders who brought the woman they had caught in the act of adultery to him, He who is without sin can cast the first stone.

I believe that God is calling us to repent of all judgemental attitudes and to recommit ourselves to loving one another, not just those that we find easy to love but especially those that we find hard to love.

The key questions then are:

- Are we helping others to grow in righteousness, peace and joy as they are filled with the Holy Spirit (v 17)?

- Are we building people up and drawing them into experiencing the grace of God for themselves?

At the end of the day the only actions that count are those that spring from our faith and trust in God, and lead to the growth of this faith in others (v 23).