

## Romans 14:1-18.

This week, people in our region have received this document. (Same sex marriage voting form) If you haven't yet, you will soon. It's an invitation from our government - via the Bureau of Statistics - to participate in a survey on whether Australia should legislate to accept same sex marriage?

As you are no doubt aware, this has stirred up a storm of controversy - both inside and outside the church, between factions with opposing viewpoints. In many places, it's become ugly and vindictive. We have been beset on all sides with arguments for and against. The most distressing element of all, as far as I'm concerned, is that this debate has set certain parts of the church against each other - mostly those with the strongest held opinions.

How are we to deal with this? Obviously, within the Christian Church, and even within the Anglican Communion, there are differing convictions. Can one side be right and the other wrong? How do we know whether an opinion we hold - or would LIKE to hold - is the right one? Does it matter?

As I've spoken to various people over the last several weeks, as I've read article after article from well known and lesser known contributors - the one thing that is evident above all else, is that within the Christian Church, there is no single opinion. There are those who feel there SHOULD be - but there isn't.

There have always been controversies and factions in the church. It's part of the fabric of a flawed humanity. Some controversies have caused dissention within churches - others have fragmented the church.

Our reading from Romans this morning has much to say about this. Listen again to what Paul says in the first part of our Romans reading:

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling 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 judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment 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.

A major issue for Paul's readers concerned meat which had been offered to idols. Once it had been used for 'idol worship', it was often sold in the markets and it wasn't always possible to tell which meat had been used in idol worship and which meat hadn't been. Some of the believers from strict Jewish backgrounds couldn't shake the conviction that to eat such meat would result in them

becoming contaminated, or 'unclean', despite the new Christian teaching on freedom from the law. And because they might inadvertently buy meat that had been offered to idols from the local neighbourhood butcher – it was safer not to eat meat at all! Then there were those who were able to grasp their new freedom in Christ, and were able to tuck into meat that had been offered to idols without any reservations whatsoever.

This became a problem for the Roman church. It caused them to divide into factions. The vegetarians condemned the meat eaters, and the meat eaters looked at the vegetarians with contempt, because they thought it showed weakness of faith. And it all created bad blood between the believers!

This issue of same sex marriage is causing the same 'bad blood' between believers. In the last century or two, there have been many more such issues.

Can you think of any? (Abortion, stem cell research, genetic modification, euthanasia, women in leadership, church music, liturgy or lack thereof, - and in earlier eras, dancing, theatre going, alcohol, -oh yes, and slavery)

There are as many things that divide the contemporary church as divided the ancient church! More perhaps. In fact this is how our different denominations came into being in the first place. They are a concession to our flawed efforts to understand the Scriptures.

To live with the non judgmental attitude of love and acceptance that Paul speaks of, is one element of what it means to 'carry our cross' – a key concept for Christian living. To 'carry our cross' means denying ourselves and that's not an easy call, is it? It is far easier to rigidly stick to our own preferences and opinions than to 'give a little' – and honour the other person whose preferences we don't agree with!

How are we to deal with differing opinions and practices within the church – and within our parish?

Let's go back to the passage. In it, Paul gives us four guidelines which help us to deal with the differences we find in our own setting, and if we employ them, will enable us to be more the people that God wants us to be.

### **1: don't get upset.**

In the first verse of ch. 14, Paul says, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." No matter how hurt or upset we may feel over what others choose to believe - or do - in our church, we need to realise that people's preferences in secondary things are not worth getting keyed up about. They are what Paul might call "disputable matters" and they are matters on which we should refrain from passing judgement. In fact, Paul is

really serious about this. He repeats himself in v 4 and again in v13 – “Don’t judge one another!”

Rather we should simply accept a person who sees things differently from the way we do, and respond to them in love and acceptance.

St Augustine nailed it when he said, “In things essential, unity; in things non essential, liberty. In all things, charity.” Charity of course means love. Our very diverse Anglican Communion seeks to operate in this way.

**2. Whatever we do, it should be with a clear conscience.** In other words, if we hold a particular belief, or decide on a particular course of action, we should do so because we have thought and prayed about it, and feel that this is God’s will for us. Note I said, for US - not for everyone else as well.

In v 5, Paul introduces another issue which was dividing the Roman church – the Sabbath. He says, “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.”

Paul was saying that if you take a stand on something – make sure you are fully convinced that the stand you take is right for you. Don’t just think or do something because it’s what others think or do, or because it’s the way it’s always been done. Take your issue before God, and decide with him what you should do.

**3: Whatever you do, do it completely for God.**

Paul continues in v6: “Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor 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.”

Paul is reminding his readers that as Christians, they should no longer live to serve themselves. Their focus should now be to serve and glorify God, and everything they do, they should do completely for him. Whether they eat meat or not, or observe the Sabbath or not, they should do it fully for God, seeking to glorify him.

**4: Don’t be a stumbling block to your weaker brothers or sisters.**

**This last guideline is perhaps the hardest to hold to because it is the one where we need to ‘deny ourselves’ more than the others. But it is perhaps the most powerful one because it causes us to grow in love for each other!**

v13 says, Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

Besides not passing judgement on their fellow Christians, Paul tells the Roman Christians they should go a step further, and make the decision not to cause their weaker brothers or sisters to 'stumble' in their faith. Paul spells this out in the next verses. He says, "If you're happy to eat meat offered to idols, but by doing so, you distress your brother who's not – THEN DON'T DO IT!"

Paul himself is convinced that nothing is 'unclean' in itself, but he points out that his readers can actually do a lot of damage by flaunting their freedom in front of a brother who hasn't got there yet. Listen to v 14-15:

**I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.**

Paul is asking his readers to make acting in love the most important factor in their choices.

Can you remember Paul's four guidelines?

- 1 – Don't get upset and judge others**
- 2 – Do everything in good conscience**
- 3 – Do everything completely for God**
- 4 – Don't be a stumbling block to others' faith** (Always act in love)

When it comes to 'disputable matters' - not the core Gospel message, mind you - 'disputable matters', our greatest witness is not to preach our passionately held belief, browbeating others into submission - it is to listen, and to love, while holding fast to those beliefs we feel God has led us to hold.

This is an amazingly appropriate reading for us as God's people at this point in our nation's thinking. Let's ask ourselves how we might use these four guidelines to improve the way we relate to each other in our communities and in our parish.

As Paul tells us in Romans 13:10, "love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Let's pray.