

Sermon for Evensong on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, 8th July 2018

[*Jeremiah 20:1-11*], *Romans 14:1-17*

'You are what you eat'. I've always smiled at this passage, where St Paul seems to put himself in the position of the alpha male, a rugby playing, beef eating hearty, who might be inclined to be a bit sniffy about his younger brother, who is a vegetarian, for some unaccountable reason. Proper chaps don't eat vegetables. Indeed some proper chaps take this to considerable extremes and avoid greens together. They stick to steak and chips only. Well, of course, this is not a case of St Paul micromanaging what the disciples in Rome should be eating.

In the Jewish tradition, of course, there are things which, for religious reasons, observant Jews are not allowed to eat. Pork, for example. And before we talk about the religious reasons for avoiding certain foods I would point out that some of the old Jewish food rules are sensible on medical and public health grounds as well. Pork goes off quickly in Middle Eastern temperatures.

Paul is referring to people who choose either to eat or to not eat foods because they believe that God has forbidden them to eat them or positively ordered them to eat them. Think of the manna in the desert, divine food which God recommended. *Panis angelicus*, the bread of angels.

And of course the ultimate spiritual food is the Lord's Supper, where we 'feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving'. It's not a form of cannibalism, as the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals*, 15.44) may have hinted. There seems to have been an urban myth that the Christians had an initiation ceremony which involved child sacrifice and cannibalism, amazing as it sounds to us.

Holy Communion, eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ, is not literal but sacramental, an 'outward and visible sign of an inner spiritual grace'. It's a really clear example of doing something 'to the Lord', for the Lord, or with the Lord in mind. It depends for its power on the faith of the person eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper. The beginning of this passage in *Romans* is clearly talking about this.

Depending how strong your faith is, you can eat anything, or, if you are a doubtful, more sceptical type, 'another, who is weak', can only eat 'herbs', or vegetables. I wonder if the word 'herbs' is one of those old English usages which have got into American English - they talk about 'Erbs' [sic] in a context which suggests to me that they mean more than just rosemary sage and thyme.

St Paul is saying that whatever we do, whatever we take to eat, whatever we choose, we do it 'to the Lord'. This 'to' does not mean the same as when we do

something 'to' someone. It's more like 'for'. We do it for the Lord. Another translation offers the idea that we do something 'with the Lord in mind', which I think gives a good idea of what St Paul meant.

For example, 'He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord'. In other words, if someone thinks that a particular day is special, for religious reasons, it means that he has the Lord in mind in deciding whether to make that day a special day or not. All this chapter in St Paul's Letter to the Romans is an eloquent plea that Christians should be tolerant of each other's views.

'Regarding' a day, thinking a particular day is special in some way, could, for example, be relevant to the question of Sunday trading. Do you think that it is Sunday that is the Sabbath, and that if we had been to Waitrose today, (preferably just after the 10 o'clock service, as half of St Andrew's and this congregation seem to do), we would have been breaking one of the Ten Commandments, to keep the Sabbath holy?

There's quite a good case for saying that we wouldn't have been. Because, Sunday isn't necessarily the Sabbath. If you're Jewish for example, Saturday is the sabbath. The point about having a Sabbath day is to give a day of rest rather than to specify which particular day in the week is the day off. If we are Jewish it is Saturday, but if we are Christian it is usually Sunday.

But if you have to work on Sunday, there is no reason why you shouldn't take another day off instead. Godfrey, for example, like a lot of vicars, takes Fridays off. What St Paul is saying is that none of this actually matters much, except that we should not condemn each other for our own particular preferences. We should not 'judge thy brother' - or sister, indeed - because all these little differences are of no real consequence, when you think that we will eventually all stand before the judgement seat of Christ.

At various stages in Christian history theologians have debated what the 'important' things to believe in are, and what are ἀδιάφορα, Greek for 'things that don't make a difference' - which is almost what the word sounds like even to us: all you need to know is that α- as in ἀδιάφορα is a negative: 'not' διαφορά, in this context, things that make a difference.

There have been several times in the history of the church when there has been controversy about what is ἀδιάφορα and what is important.

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther had a falling-out with Philipp Melanchthon over the importance of 'justification by faith' as opposed to gaining salvation by doing good works - or celebrating elaborate masses.

Then again the Puritans, in the Westminster Confession of faith (1646), asserted the rule that only things which were in the Bible were important - 'sola scriptura', only scripture, counted. That's still basically the URC and Baptist position. Church structures, hierarchy and liturgical formulae weren't as important. There is a distinction between true worship itself and what were called 'circumstances of worship', the Biblical essentials on the one hand and the way the worship was organised, not so important, ἀδιάφορα even, on the other. The Puritan position was summed up in this:

*In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas* (commonly translated as "in necessary things unity; in uncertain things liberty; in all things charity"). The guiding principle was a line from Romans 14, after the passage which we had as our lesson tonight, v.19:

*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.*

That's sometimes used as an introduction to the Peace.

Then came the Anglican 'latitudinarians', who were even more relaxed about what mattered. *'The latitudinarian Anglicans of the 17th century built on Richard Hooker's position in [Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity](#). Hooker (1554–1600) argues that what God cares about is the moral state of the individual soul. Aspects such as church leadership are "things indifferent".'* [Wikipedia, accessed at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latitudinarian>]

You will also find an echo of the same issues at the beginning of your little blue Prayer Books, in the section called 'Of Ceremonies'. Page x at the front of the book. Again, this is about what we need to do in order to offer appropriate worship to God. Should it be elaborate services with great torrents of flowery words, dressed up with beautiful music sung by accomplished, perhaps professional, choirs - or should it be stripped-back, plain words, no music - or maybe simple amateur 'worship songs'?

This brings us up with a bit of a jolt to what we do today. What is essential to the worship here at St Mary's? Remember that this morning we had a special event in our church life: we admitted five young ones to be able to receive Holy Communion before they're confirmed.

What looks important to them? What does it mean to them to worship the Lord? I think that St Paul set the tone pretty well all those years ago, maybe only 30 years after Jesus was crucified, when he counselled the Roman Christians not to look down on each other because some things were important to some of them and other things to others.

So - what's important to us, here, at St Mary's? What can we see other Christian friends doing differently? I mean, we make quite a thing about our doing things in a distinctively different, traditional way here. But how much is at the heart of our faith, and how much just our taste, our preference?

I think I can suggest that one way one would argue would be that we don't water things down. The little ones this morning went through a proper communion service with some grownup words in. We think they will be more likely to think deeply about the service if they've had to look up some words. Their parents didn't think there was anything babyish either. Our approach is not to water things down. God isn't an easy thing. Immortal, invisible.

And when we have been exposed to God's grace, when we have come to the Lord in prayer, in the way we do, can you tell? Does it make a difference to our lives? Do we 'repent'?

Put it another way. We aim to eat the red meat of worship and witness here at St Mary's. Full fat. But we mustn't look down on the friends who only take the vegetarian, decaf option. Which are you?

Amen.

Hugh Bryant