

Sermon – 17 September 2017 – St Mary’s North Melbourne

Romans 14:1-12 – Tolerance

The first part of the fourteenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans deals with a question of utmost relevance for the church today – how to deal with disagreement between Christians when strong opinions are held in good faith on both sides. Today’s reading sits in the midst of Paul’s responses to a series of related questions: what makes a Christian a true Christian? How should we regard secular authority? How ought we to treat one another at the most basic level? Ought we to work first to satisfy ourselves, or our neighbour? Is the Gospel just for the “in” crowd, or is it for everyone?

In today’s reading, we see that some in the early church believed that in the Gospel one had the freedom to eat anything, even that which was proscribed under the Jewish law. Others felt that, in obedience to the Scriptures, Christians should maintain all the ritual prohibitions around food and, if anything, be more zealous than was strictly required, in order to be seen to be righteous. Likewise, some felt that the Sabbath should be strictly observed in obedience to the Law, whilst others felt that the Gospel freed them from the strict observance of the Sabbath. In both instances, and by implication in many other things as well, Paul counsels that what we might call the “party of freedom” must not “despise” or “belittle” those of what we might call “the party of the Law”, and that those of the party of the Law must not “pass judgement” on those of the party of freedom. As Romans scholar Brendan Byrne puts it, “Paul’s call is for tolerance. Within the basic act of faith characteristic of all, Christian community living can tolerate gradations in the working out of faith’s implications. It is not necessary to settle all matters once and for all at the cost of community peace.”¹

Byrne’s analysis of this passage is helpful. On the question of eating, which is the central example Paul uses, he notes “Those who eat are tempted to belittle the hesitation of those who do not, doubtless dismissing their hesitations as a relic of a pre-Christian attitude that they ought long since to have abandoned. The “weak”, on the other hand, unwilling to be pushed in this way, are prone to retaliate by passing judgement upon – condemning as immoral – the free practice of the “strong”.”

Byrne’s analysis, and indeed this passage of Scripture more generally, can be directly applied to all manner of questions of debate within the contemporary church. The most obvious for Australian Christians right now, is the debate over same-sex marriage. If we characterise those Christians who favour the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples as equating to those who feel free to eat of hitherto forbidden foods, and those who wish strictly to adhere to the traditional church teaching of marriage as between one man

¹ Brendan Byrne SJ, *Romans* (Sacra Pagina, The Liturgical Press, 1996) p.408ff.

and one woman for life as equating to those who refuse to eat on the grounds of the traditional interpretation of the Law, then Paul's teaching on the matter currently in debate in our churches is clear. Those who favour equal marriage rights ought not to belittle or despise those who in good conscience cannot allow such a thing, and those whose faith prevents them from accepting the marriage of two men or two women ought not to pass judgement on those who believe that such a thing can be and should be allowed.

In Byrne's words again, "If God has accepted one's fellow believers precisely as they are, one cannot do otherwise as a Christian than to allow that acceptance to determine one's own attitude and behaviour."

So . . . the take-home message here is that Christians are free to hold either view, are free to act on either view, are free to teach either view, and are free to campaign for either view. What we are not free to do is to belittle or despise one another, or to pass judgement on one another because of views held in all sincerity of faith by fellow Christians, based on their understanding of the law of Scripture and/or the freedom we have in the Gospel.

The urgency of Australian Christians, and Australian society, heeding Paul's call for non-judgemental and non-belittling tolerance been well articulated for me in two amongst the very, very many articles published on the equal marriage debate over the past week or so. The first was published in *The Age* last Saturday, and resonated very strongly for me personally. The author, Naomi Stead, narrated the story of sitting in a café with her (female) partner and child, listening to a conversation at the next table that briefly touched on the postal survey. The conversation came out in favour of a "yes" vote. Stead comments:

But as I sat there, tense, waiting for them to say something upsetting, I realised that I really didn't want to hear what the hell they thought, not anything at all about their views on the issue – positive or negative. I wanted to eat my eggs, and label my boy's drawing with the broccoli patch and cow paddock, and mind my own business and have everyone else mind theirs.

I realised that I was trying desperately not to listen: but, of course, I had no choice. It's not the kind of thing you can easily block out, when others idly discuss your fate. And the fact is, the conversation could so easily have gone the other way, which is why I was so edgy. What about that other couple, sitting a little further down the table – what would they say? And that group over there in the corner? What judgments might they like to loudly air about my "lifestyle"?

People like me are simply not safe in a public space at the moment, especially in the virtual public space of social media. The attacks could come at any time, from anywhere, and so we're wary, on guard – even more than usual.

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A positive judgment is still a judgment, and we LGBTIQ folk have endured the judgment of strangers all our lives. The difference is that this time it's systemic – and

in this sense we are now seeing the worst (legitimated, public) homophobia I have ever experienced in my 42 years of life.

Judgement – even a positive judgement – can be hurtful. And if you are gay, and dare I suggest perhaps especially if you are a gay Christian, judgement is bread and butter of your life right now. And St Paul and Naomi Stead are equally clear - it shouldn't be.

The second article was an opinion piece on the ABC news website by retired Sydney bishop Robert Forsyth. Forsyth holds a particular view on this debate which I do not share, but his comments about the need for maturity and mutual respect are spot on:

While we can't expect those who have deep convictions on either side to change, it will be important to avoid a "winner takes all" outcome that risks permanently sidelining whole sections of our society. We are still going to have to live together as best we can for a very long time. This is why care needs to be taken, before the matter is resolved, to prepare for the aftermath.

The big question is whether there can be a measure of mutual respect from both sides in the face of wide-ranging and irrevocable disagreement.

Same-sex marriage may well be inevitable in this country. But Australia continuing as a civil and civilised society is still up for grabs.

Both Stead and Forsyth put forward arguments that sit comfortably alongside St Paul in today's epistle reading: don't judge others, don't belittle them either, and for God's sake, and all our sakes, work out a way to co-operate within the breadth of the Gospel. What we must do in our society, and in our church as well, is to work for a future in which the tolerance of differences of opinion is possible and real. Genuine differences of belief, when those differences are sincerely held in faith, can be endured, but only when one party – either party – does not seek to smash the living daylights out of the other, and to win at all costs. After all, "each of us will be accountable to God."

- Craig D'Alton