

GSM 17/6/12

Romans 13:13 - 14:13

Read

I grew up in rural Bedfordshire and one of the things you notice when you live in rural Bedfordshire is how the local press is occupied with different things than the national press. Here are some headlines I have found from other newspapers which show the sort of thing that the local press is interested in:-





And my favourite ...



Sometimes you think that the journalists must have lost the will to live, having to write on such banal stuff. But local issues get people worked up – the vitriol splattered across the pages of the *Beds on Sunday* newspaper when I was growing up was quite remarkable, whether it was about double yellow lines next to the supermarket, rights of way over fields, or whatever. Looking at the

local press in the 80s you wouldn't have known that there was a recession, a miner's strike, or war in the South Atlantic.

Paul was writing to the Romans in a similar situation where local issues were causing grief in the church, and this passage is a response to that. What was happening was that some Jewish Christians in the church in Rome were still following the strict dietary laws required by the Jewish religion, even though they had converted to Christianity. You can see that if you look ahead to verse 14 when it talks about food being "clean" or "unclean" – we're in the language of the Old Testament food laws. We can see what was happening from verse 3 of this morning's passage - the Gentile Christians, who didn't worry about food laws that didn't apply, were treating their Jewish brothers with contempt, whilst the Jewish converts were judging the Gentiles for their failure to obey the dietary laws. The believers should have been building each other up, growing in their faith, doing good works in their community and explaining the gospel but instead they were *arguing about food*. As with the local press in Bedford, the local trivial concerns were obscuring the more important things. The situation in Rome sadly mimics the situation in lots of churches up and down the land today, of whatever denomination, when people fall out over points of minor detail. Churches split because of arguments over what music should be played. Relationships are broken because people take different sides of an argument over whether or not the clergy should wear robes or how people should be baptised. All the while the world is waiting for the good news of God's love to be explained to them, but those in the church seems more interested in beating each other up – hardly a good advert for a gospel of love. What has the Bible to say about these arguments?

There are three things I want to suggest we learn from the Bible about this. First, the importance of the right sort of judgment. Secondly, it is hard, hard, hard. Thirdly, how to do it.

So first, **the need for the right sort of judgment**. Now, on one level you think the whole point of this passage is not to judge. Verses 10-13: "You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat your brother or sister with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat."¹¹ It is written:

“As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will confess to God.’”^[a]

¹² So then, we will all give an account of ourselves to God.

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.”

The danger that the Roman Christians were falling into was that they were judging *each other*. Paul makes it clear that that is God’s role and not ours. We are not the judge of other people – we are not equipped, being neither powerful enough to do it or perfect enough to do it. The picture that Paul gives in verse 4 is that of someone else judging another person’s servant. It’s a bit lost on us these days because none of us, to the best of my knowledge, are members of the aristocracy and still maintain butlers and chambermaids. But in those days it would have been a shameful thing to go to someone’s house and start mouthing off about the inadequacies of their servants – because in doing so you make it clear that you think you have authority over those servants, which you don’t. You’re just an invited guest, not the master of the house. So it is with us. When it comes to the kingdom of heaven, we are just invited guests, not master of the house.

So don’t judge. But sometimes you need to judge. I don’t mean judge each other, but judge other *things*. Think of your friendships. Now, I’m good friends with several of you, and you’re good friends with me, so I’ll ask you now – don’t take it personally what I have to say. I love you all. Really I do. But here’s the thing. Sometimes your friends have little habits that, well, wind you up a bit. And you have little habits that wind them up. I’ll take one example, and I’ll use me and Jo as a non-controversial example. I love Jo very deeply, and I am very lucky to have her as my wife. And also, she is horribly *just in time*. If we have to catch a plane or a boat, or whatever, she will arrive *just in time* to catch it. This plays havoc with my nerves. I like to turn up at least two hours early and leave enough time so that if aliens do land on the motorway on the way to the ferry, then we can still negotiate terms for world peace before catching the ferry. Jo is gracious enough to put up with my obsession about being early, and I am far less gracious about her being just in time. Maybe for you and your friends you have different examples. But they’re your friends – you take them as they are, even the things that wind you up. You would never say “I love being your friend but in order for me to stay your friend, you need to learn to like my sort of music, or learn better table manners”, or whatever. They’re your friends. But then, because they’re your friends, if you saw them really making a big mistake, you would say something, because you love them. If they were in danger of harming themselves or others, you would summon up the courage and confront them. If they were drinking too much, if they were being unfaithful to their spouse, if they were neglecting their family, you would say something. It would be risky, but you would do it, because they are your friends and you have a responsibility towards them. You would judge what is

important and what is not. You don't sweat the small stuff, the stuff that winds you up, but you do deal with the big stuff.

It's the same here. When it comes to matters of faith, there are certain things we shouldn't get vexed about, even if they wind us up, but other things where we have a responsibility to intervene. Look at verse 1: "Accept those whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over *disputable matters*". Paul says that we shouldn't quarrel over disputable matters. Now the reason that we read this morning from verse 13 of chapter 13 is because Paul is quite clear that not all matters are disputable. Paul is clear in verse 13 of chapter 13 that drunkenness, sexual immorality and jealousy and in-fighting are not disputable matters – he warns the Roman Christians directly against those things. Reading chapter 14 in isolation you might get the impression that Paul is saying that the Roman Christians need to be tolerant, but you only have to go back two verses into chapter 13 to see that they shouldn't be tolerant of everything. They shouldn't tolerate drunkenness, sexual immorality and jealousy and in-fighting. Another example - it's interesting in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 that when the Spirit writes to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira, the churches are criticised because in Pergamum some members of the church hold to particular forms of false teaching and in Thyatira the church tolerates someone called Jezebel who is misleading people into sexual immorality. The letter to these churches makes it clear that *tolerance* of this false teaching and of the prophetess Jezebel, far from being commended, is something that the churches should repent of. So, Romans 14 makes it clear that we should be tolerant, but wise in what we tolerate.

So what are disputable matters? Well, Scripture contains lots of guidance in various places but does not give us a complete fully indexed accessible list, so we have to try to work it out ourselves. In this church we have nailed our colours, in terms of core beliefs, to the mast of the statement of faith of the Evangelical Alliance. The statement of faith is on our website. Have a look at it later today and see what it contains. But it's not a complete list of things that Scripture regards as important. So we need to try to work it out. If we do it together we are less likely to get it wrong because the more contribution we have from those who follow Jesus, the more our individual blind spots will be overcome – though it requires grace to submit to the opinion of others on something that we might feel strongly about. *Our* opinion is going to be better informed than *my* opinion.

But. It is **hard, hard, hard**. Hard x 3. *Hard cubed*. Hard for three reasons – it's hard because everyone has their blind spots, it's hard because everyone feels they have lots to lose, and it's hard because relationships are hard. Let's deal with these in turn. It's hard because everyone has their

blind spots. Now be honest, when you heard verse 1 of chapter 14 read, what did you think? Was it, perhaps, “I must try harder to accept people who are weak”? But how many of us identify ourselves *with the weak*, as opposed to the ones who need to accept the weak? Not many, I would think. How many would have as our first reaction to that verse “thank heavens I'm part of a church where my weak faith can be accepted”? Yet if you look at Scripture you notice something interesting. Here in Romans 14 we see an instance of the Jewish Christians having weak faith because of their insistence on following the old dietary laws. But in 1 Corinthians 8 Paul writes to the church in Corinth about Christians there who had come from a background of idol-worship and who were unable to eat food sold in the market that had been sacrificed to idols, because it spooked them. Paul calls these people weak. Who would the weak people have been in Corinth? Those who were accustomed to idols – the *Gentiles*. Who would have been strong? The *Jews* in that church. Two different churches, Corinth and Rome, two different situations – in one them, the Jewish Christians are weak because of their background in obeying the food laws, in the other the Gentiles Christians are weak because of their background in worshipping idols. What should we conclude then? *That each of us is likely to be strong in some situations and weak in others*. What I find interesting in this chapter and in 1 Corinthians 8 is that areas of weakness were shared by various Jews and various Gentiles – communities of people had weaknesses because of the society they came from. Jews in Rome came from the background of strict observance of the dietary laws, and were weak in their attitude to food. Gentiles in Corinth came from the background of idol-worship and were also weak in their attitude to food but in a different way. Another example - Jo and I had Hector Antelo from Bolivia to stay with us a few years back, and he said that Bolivian Christians would be scandalised by our dancing and drinking because in Bolivia dancing and drinking are associated with brothels. Don't get me wrong - Hector's faith was and is very strong - but it was interesting to hear about the cultural background that exists in Bolivian Christian circles. Everyone is the product to a certain extent of their background. What about us? Well, our background is in a society that values things over people and individual freedoms over collective responsibility. Maybe our weaknesses lie in those areas – in holding on too much to our money and possessions, and in not committing to the body of believers as much as we should. We will all have our blind spots, and those blind spots are likely to be influenced by the society we have come from. It makes it hard for us to have a proper perspective on everything.

Also, it's hard because we feel we have lots to lose, and because relationships are difficult. I want to touch on these, but not spend too much time on them, partly because these are my thoughts rather than taken from Scripture, and partly because they're so obvious. So, we may feel we have lots to lose. If you understood the Christian faith at all you will realise that it is something that makes

radical demands on your life. It affects how you deal with your money, your ambition, your sexuality, your family relationships, your home, your security, your place of work – it affects everything in life. All of us who follow Jesus have invested everything we have and everything we are in what we believe, or if we haven't then we should have done so. So to have someone else disagree with one aspect of what you do or think in your life as a Christian can be *very* disconcerting to us because of how much we've invested in our faith. You want reassurance that you're on the right path, that others agree, but what you get is someone who does things very differently to you, which makes you think if you're on the right path at all. Because if he thinks that, if she does that, and if he or she are a member of this church, then what does that say about what I believe? Because what they're doing looks odd at best, and probably wrong. And of course it's hard because relationships are difficult. We all come from different backgrounds and assume that our way of doing things is right. Hold the front page – others have different views. I've already used the example of Jo and I differing over timekeeping. That's a trivial example, but there are other bigger issues where we might find ourselves bumping up against someone else in the church who thinks, for various reasons, exactly the opposite thing to us. Relationships with each other in the church are absolutely crucial – we've seen earlier in Romans 12 how each of us will depend on the others in the church – but they are also one of the hardest things to deal with in the church.

So how do we do this? How do we assess what we let go? How do we deal with each other? The passage gives two answers – we do so *worshipfully* and we do so *sacrificially*. Firstly, worshipfully. Look with me at verses 5 to 8: “Some consider one day more sacred than another; others consider every day alike. **Everyone should be fully convinced in their own mind.** ⁶ Those who regard one day as special do so to the Lord. Those who eat meat do so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and those who abstain do so to the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷ **For we do not live to ourselves alone and we do not die to ourselves alone.** ⁸ **If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.**” What Paul is saying here is that it is important to commit to a particular position and have that as part of your worship to God. The notion of doing something “to the Lord” in verses 6 and 8 is an interesting one. Maybe the best way of looking at it is thinking about what the opposite of that is. What does it look like to do something **not** to the Lord? Well, maybe it looks like taking a particular position on a disputable matter just for the sake of debate, or to make you look clever, or score some cheap points at someone else's expense that you have taken a dislike to. Maybe it looks like taking a view on something because it helps us get away with something – looking for loopholes in the Bible on particular things that we know to be wrong. I don't think I'm alone in

having done that in the past! Paul says that in our decisions on these things our motivation should be entirely whole-hearted and part of our giving thanks. It should not be partisan, taking sides in unnecessary debates in the church. Paul makes it clear in verse 4 that as long as we hold true to the key elements of our faith, as long as we truly follow Jesus, then God will make us stand, even if our opinions on various minor points differ hugely. We should still judge carefully and wisely what our position is on the matters that face us, but we should do so, verse 6, giving thanks to God and, verse 8, doing so to the Lord. We should be committed in our views and they should form part of our worship to God.

Finally, we should deal with each other sacrificially. The word “accept” in verse 1 is an interesting one. There’s an acceptance which is pretty half-hearted. If I tell my children that they are going to have to spend the afternoon with friends or family where they want to do something different, they will “accept” it with a certain look and a certain intonation in their voice as they say [sigh] “OK ...”. But here the word means much more than that. It carries the implication of *making adjustments to your life to make others feel welcome*.

An example – how many here who don’t have children under five have recently had people with children under five to stay? Did you do anything to your house before they came? Maybe you put a barrier in front of the stairs, or moved the sharp knives away from the bottom drawer. My parents have recently had a French family with two very young children to stay, the younger of the two having just started walking. Everything at the moment is an adventure for this little girl. My Mum collects solid glass paperweights, which are beautiful and decorate her living room. When this little French girl came to stay she put away all her paperweights, making the room less beautiful, because the little girl might break them, drop them on her foot, or otherwise hurt herself with them. Paul says in verse 13 that we are not to put a stumbling block in the way of a brother or sister. Just as you might adjust your home for the visit of a young child, you adjust your life to accommodate other brothers and sisters who have particular areas where care is needed, so they don’t stumble. It’s funny, isn’t it, as to how much easier this is for Christians to do with non-Christian friends than with others in the church? None of us, after all, would require our Muslim neighbours to drink wine or our Jewish friends to eat pork, but yet we expect others in the church to fall in line with our thinking on minor items. Paul is saying, adjust your life. This will be sacrificial – it is hard to say “you are doing something which I find odd, but I am going to make space in my life for you. I am going to adjust my life for you”. That’s hard. We began this sermon series by looking at the first two verses of Romans 12 which read “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship.”²

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” We are called to sacrifice. This is different from the way of the world – the world says “whatever you want to believe is fine for you – I don’t have a view on it – but don’t expect me to make any changes to my life”. The Christian faith turns this around completely and says “*I will come to a firm belief as to what is right, but I will change my life to accommodate you*”. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Are we prepared to put this into practice? As we’ve seen, it’s hard! Where do we get the power? Well, by looking at the one who had a firm judgment on what was right, who experienced the hardship but who obeyed sacrificially. Do you realise that on the cross, Jesus was making a negative judgment on us? He was calling us weak. He was saying “you have got it wrong”. But what an adjustment he was making in his life, to make space for us! Here was the son of God, coming from heavenly glory, to die a prolonged death and be abandoned by his father for the first time ever, solely to bring us in. The cross is our blueprint. Jesus acted unilaterally – without us being worthy of his actions – in making the ultimate sacrifice for us. If we can focus on what he has done to bring us in, if we let the power of that work in our lives through his Holy Spirit, that will help us make sacrifices in bringing others in where their beliefs may be odd to us. If we can see how we have been offered the ultimate hospitality by Jesus when we were offensive to God, we will offer hospitality to others when they offend us. If we can see how Jesus gave up his rights, we will give up our rights.

Do you see how this principle works? We need to have an understanding of what Jesus did for us on the cross to enable us to put this passage into practice. Jesus made the ultimate judgment and the ultimate adjustment for us, so we can judge wisely and adjust our lives for others, and in doing so, do it for him. It says in verse 9 that “Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” – let’s therefore resolve to put this into practice in this church as our response.