

Unity in Disagreement – Trinity 12 2011

Genesis 50 vv 15-21 p57, Ps103, Romans 14 vv 1-12 p1140, Matthew 18 vv 21-35 p985

Church is about integrity. Church is about unity. Church is about sincerity. So what do we when we sincerely disagree with other Christians? Do we divide the Church and go our own separate ways, effectively creating lots of new little churches in place of the one great Church? Or do we preserve the unity of the one great Church by expelling those with whom we disagree? Or do we pretend that sincerely held differences of opinion don't matter? Sometimes, of course, differences don't matter, but sometimes they do and we should be lacking in integrity if we pretended otherwise. Or do we acquiesce in the semi-permanent division of the eternal Church, acknowledging the existence of scores of denominations, theoretically and theologically comprising the *one, holy catholic and apostolic Church*, but evincing scant signs of visible unity.

The Church of England is currently in the midst of its consultation about women bishops. In fact, of course, this is part of the wider debate about women in ordained ministry of any kind. How do we decide questions like whether or not women should be ordained? Can we be so certain that we are right that anyone who disagrees with us must be wrong? If we are certain that we are right, what should we do with the people who disagree with us? Coerce them into accepting our point of view? We used to burn heretics. Expel them from our fellowship? We used to excommunicate people who wouldn't accept church discipline. Let them leave us and join other churches? Some individuals and congregations have already left the Church of England for Rome. Or do we let them form their own churches in accordance with their own personal convictions, as has happened in the United States of America where some congregations see themselves as belonging to a continuing Church which is truer to its Anglican heritage than the official Episcopal Church of the USA? Or do we try to accommodate the dissidents at the price of an impaired communion? Impaired communion is where we reckon we are part of the same Church but do not fully recognise the authenticity of one another's ministry and sacraments. An example of impaired communion would be the fact that there are some parishes within the Church of England which do not recognise the ordained ministry of women while others do.

It is hard to know how we should treat Christians who disagree with us on important issues even when we are sure we are right, but what do we do when we are honest enough to admit that we are not 100% sure? If we think it probable, but not certain, that God is calling women to ordained ministry, how do we relate to those Christians who think it is probable, but not certain, that He is not? It is even harder, I think, than if we are absolutely certain of our point of view and that is more than hard enough!

St Paul's letter to the Romans helps us here. Paul is concerned about principles and he will defend to the uttermost the principles of the Gospel as revealed to him by Jesus Christ. Paul never minces his words when contending with those whose theories undermine the plain truth of the Gospel: *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in.* An essential principle of the Gospel, however, is the unity of the Church, her unity

in love. We have to contend for the truth of the Gospel. We have to contend for right conduct. But truth and righteousness subsist in a unity of love. That is what I mean by integrity.

So let us look at what St Paul says to the Romans in chapter 14 of his Epistle. (You'll find it on p1140 of the pew bibles.) v1 sets the scene. As Christians we are to encourage other people in the faith, to build one another up, not to put people down, to make them feel inferior, to weaken their faith or to make them doubt their membership of the Church. It is God's Church before it is our Church.

There was evidently a dispute in the Roman Church about whether Christians should eat meat. This is not because the early Christians valued vegetarianism for its own sake. The most scrupulous would have thought that they should be observing the Jewish food laws. So they would not eat what was not kosher, which would have meant all the meat on sale in the ordinary markets. Even if they weren't worried about whether the meat was kosher, the fact was that a lot of the meat on sale had been sacrificed to pagan gods. In fact probably all of it was in some sense a sacrifice. Some Christians would have thought it impious to eat anything offered to an idol. Scrupulous Christians like these would rather be vegetarians than risk eating something that was ritually unclean. On the other hand, there were many Christians who believed that the Jewish food laws didn't apply to gentile Christians and that the pagan gods didn't exist. Idols, they knew, were mere nothings. So it didn't matter if the meat wasn't kosher or even if it was left over from a pagan sacrifice. Meat was meat and, so long as you gave thanks for it to the one true God, nothing was unclean.

How do you feel about eating kosher food or halal meat – animals killed according to the rituals prescribed for Moslems? Halal meat is served to all children in Harrow schools on the grounds that it accommodates the Moslems supposedly without giving offence to anyone else.

It would be very easy for those who were scrupulous enough to forgo meat and live on vegetables to feel superior to those who ate just about anything. Conversely it would be easy to feel superior because you knew that you didn't have to worry about food rules or non-existent pagan deities and to look down on the people you regarded as superstitious for caring about such things.

It would also have been very easy to have tremendous rows in whatever was the Roman equivalent of the PCC both about what Christians ought to eat at home and about what might and might not be served at church social events. Don't forget that at that time what we call the Eucharist, the great Sacrament of unity, was probably celebrated as part of a communal meal. It would have been very difficult if those present not only refused to eat some of the food but despised those who did eat it.

St Paul says that we are all answerable to God. We must all answer to our own consciences. We are, each one of us, servants of God. It is not for us to judge one another and one

another's conduct. We are here to build one another up in the faith, not to find fault and to tear down. We are here to promote unity, not to find reasons for schism and division.

There also seems to have been a difference of opinion in the Roman Church about observing the Sabbath. This must surely mean Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Some Christians would have thought that observing the Sabbath was part of the Law which Christians had inherited from the Jews and which they were now bound to keep as a mark of their membership of the people of God. I think it almost certain that all Christians would have kept Sunday (or Saturday night) as the day Jesus rose from the dead and that the Christian community would have met for Eucharistic worship on Saturday night or first thing Sunday morning. The rest of Sunday would then have been a working day for most people. It was only later, when Christians were far more numerous and influential, that Sunday would take the place of Saturday as a day of rest as well as a day on which the Church met to share the Resurrection in the Eucharistic celebration. So what was under dispute in Rome was probably whether or not Christians should keep Saturday as the Sabbath.

There are parallels with the debate about women clergy. Those early Christians who thought they should observe some sort of food laws and keep the Sabbath on Saturday could point to Scripture and tradition. They could have said that the Bible commanded them to observe the seventh day of the week. (Sunday is the first day of the week). And that the Bible commanded them to abstain from unclean foods. They might well have believed that the food laws and the observance of the Sabbath were God's eternal Will, revealed by Moses and the prophets. But the other lot, the Christians who believed you could eat just about anything and that you should go to work on Saturday just like all the other Gentiles, could have argued that all that was now changed. The Old Testament was a preparation for Christ but it was superseded by Him. The Law was fulfilled in Christ and therefore its ceremonial provisions were no longer binding on God's people. There might have been good reasons for them when the Jews were the only chosen people, wandering for forty years in the wilderness or living as an independent nation in Palestine, but now people of all races all over the world were called to become members of the chosen people and the old restrictive Jewish laws could no longer possibly apply to them all.

To be honest, we still haven't resolved the question of the Sabbath. A considerable number of Christians are Seventh Day Adventists and still keep Saturday as the Sabbath. So, I suppose, do Jews for Jesus – a group of Jewish people who accept Jesus as the Son of God but want to retain their Jewish identity. The vast majority of Christians have, however, made Sunday their Sabbath, but we are far from agreed on how it ought to be observed. In England, pretty well everything used to close on Sundays. So there was a day of effectively enforced rest and there was little to distract people from going to Church. But, on the continent, it was for much longer quite acceptable to go to Mass in the morning and then treat the rest of Sunday as a normal day. Paul talks about observing the day to the Lord or not observing the day to the Lord. He doesn't say *Leave the Lord out of it*, which is what most people nowadays seem to think. Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath is hard to grasp. He won't allow the Sabbath to be excused as an excuse for petty restrictions or as a reason to

look down on other people or as an impediment to doing good works. On the other hand, He tells us that the Sabbath was made for man, not that it was soon to be abolished in Him.

So there was room for disagreement about the Sabbath in St Paul's day and still there is today. But Paul's point is that what really matters is our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. Important as these issues are – whether to eat meat possibly offered to pagan deities, whether to participate in the Sabbath observance and, in our own day, whether God calls men and women to the same or to different kinds of ministry – they can only be debated and understood in the context of our essential unity in Christ. We don't live to ourselves or for ourselves. We live to and for the Lord. We die to and for the Lord. We belong to the Lord. Christ died to purchase us as a people for Himself. We just can't despise someone else who belongs to the same Lord we belong to. We can't hate him or her. We can't risk weakening his faith or pushing him out of God's Church. It's not out place to judge other people, but we ought to remember that we shall be judged by God. Every knee will bow to Jesus; every tongue confess Him. We shall all have to give account of ourselves before the Judgment seat of God. I will and you will.

So there will be room for differences of opinion within the Church. None of us will know everything until we know as we are known, and that will only be when we get to heaven. For now, we see as through a glass darkly. That being so there will be disagreements within the Church, but, if we are true to our nature as Christians, they can only be handled in the context of charity, love, ἀγάπη, call it what you will. Integrity requires both sincerity and unity. It may be hard to keep the two together but ultimately it is impossible to have the one without the other. Remember. St Paul concludes one of his best loved and most well known passages with these words: *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. The greatest of these is love.*