
Live for the Lord

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 17 September 2023

Exodus 14:21-29 • Romans 14:1-12 • Matthew 18:21-35



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We have a very interesting passage from Romans today. In his letter to the congregation in Rome, Paul addresses a number of things, in the hopes that it will be helpful to this new congregation in holding together in faith, and in growing in their knowledge of God and Christ. Looking back at our lectionary, I see we've been hearing from Romans almost every Sunday since Trinity, and we had a few passages earlier in the year as well. The Letter to the Romans is considered to be one of the primary statements of our faith, as Paul explains in great detail what the sacrifice of Jesus means for all of us. He always emphasises faith, salvation and new life, all free gifts from God to us; as well as our responsibility to take hold of this new life and grace and live in service to God.

I remember some years ago when I first started getting into Paul's letters in depth. My first impression at the time — and it hasn't changed much — was that Paul's arguments tend to be pretty dense, packed full of meaning, and needing a bit of

concentration and study to follow. It can be a bit of a hard slog. But when I discovered his argument comparing Adam to Jesus, I was fascinated. Sin came into the world through Adam's disobedience of God's warning about the Tree of Life; and salvation came into the world through the sacrifice of Jesus. Or as Paul puts it:

Therefore just as one man's trespass [or sin] led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

I thought to myself: God's world is symmetrical! Adam brought sin and caused us all to fall; Jesus brought righteousness and brought us all up again. All according to God's plan. God did not forget us. Adam was the first man; Jesus will be the last, when he comes again in his glory to transform us all to live in his heavenly kingdom. These are the bookends to life, the beginning and the end; like covers in a book, all is contained within. All of human history has happened or is happening or will happen between Eden and the coming of the kingdom, between creation and judgment, between Genesis and Revelation. There is symmetry; there is order; there is a plan. And Paul was a very orderly thinker. His earlier life as a Pharisee helped him after he became a disciple of Christ. All that experience in following laws and seeking to understand and teaching others came in handy. Paul was well-equipped by God to explain the mysteries of our faith to the new churches he helped establish.

In our passage today from chapter 14 of Romans, Paul talks about the differences among us, the different ways we live and serve God. He begins by saying

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. (Romans 14:1-2)

Paul was speaking specifically about Jews who had chosen to follow Christ but were still used to following the Jewish dietary laws, under which some foods are forbidden, such as pork. It must have been difficult for such people, although they had received the Holy Spirit, to change their ways. Paul says such people's faith is weak, because they are not able (at least not all at once) to accept all of Jesus' teachings. Recall that Jesus said that it is not the foods we put in our mouths but the evil that comes out of our hearts which defiles us; he thereby "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). Jesus gave us the freedom to eat all foods, but Paul is saying that if someone still holds onto the old dietary habits they had established before becoming Christian, it's okay. Don't hold it against them and don't make a big deal out of it.

Paul says we should not quarrel over "disputable matters." That's quite important, for it acknowledges that there are disputable matters — things we can disagree on and still be Christians. Ours is not a faith which requires absolute obedience to a

set of rules, unlike some other major world faiths. There are really only a handful of things that one has to believe to be a Christian — the big, important things — like, Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus died and rose again to save us from our sins. God created the world and everything in it. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide. That sort of thing. Aside from those things and a few others like them, we can disagree with our brothers and sisters in Christ and still be part of one Communion. It is sad that human beings, the argumentative lot that we are, constantly find issues that split us apart. If we were half as diligent in looking for things that we share, rather than for the things that separate us, the world would be a much happier place.

Paul gives the example of considering one day more sacred than another, or seeing them as all the same. If I worship primarily on a Sunday and you do it on a Thursday, is that an important difference? I would say not. The important thing is that we do recognise Christ as our Saviour, and worship him in truth and love. Does it matter that I am an Anglican and someone else is a Methodist or a Catholic? To some people, yes. But again — is it not more important that we follow Christ, than that we worship in a certain way?

Whatever you do, do it for the Lord. As Paul says, “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14:8). God is our focus. Worship the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. If you do that, other things don’t much matter. In the end, we will all stand before Jesus, who will judge us on how we lived our lives in service to God and to our fellow human beings. Give thanks to God and live for the Lord. Amen.