

Romans 14:17-19 - 19th after Pentecost [25.9.2016]

Bound together by the love of Christ!

¹⁷ For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. ¹⁹ So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

[²⁰ Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble.] [NLT]

Have you noticed that there are some people who - no matter what you are talking about - are always right. They are unable - or unwilling - to even contemplate another point of view. They state that it is a 'matter of principle' - and they won't budge from their way of seeing things.

This seems to also have a bearing on the demonstrations on the University campuses - where students who wish to take part in classes, who want to write tests, are being prevented from doing so - the demonstrators believe that they are in the right. In some cases they are even forcing those who have not part in the protest actions, to take part in the protest.

This may also have been the case in the church over the centuries. People who are so sure that they have the right way of being church - and of wanting to force others to believe as they do, or to be labelled as heretics.

The call Paul makes here, is to understand who we have become, and not to let things which are irrelevant get in the way of our relationships in the church. After all, we have been

Bound together by the love of Christ!

Always being right - but by which standards do we judge that. For small children the need for routine seems to be very important - as soon as something changes in their routine they get upset - they won't eat foods they don't know, they won't sleep in surrounds they are not familiar with. Does that mean that young children should not be subjected to change? - that the whole world must be changed to accommodate them?

There may be times in the church when we act like small children - only not in the sense Jesus meant, when he called on his followers to trust as children do. But we may be a bit childish in the way we hold on to our routine, - it's as if we send out the message that we know what is right, and that the way in which we do things, is the only way. [It took me quite some time to discover that the sentence: 'But we've always done it this way' is not unique to the Lutheran church!]

The first big split which occurred in the early church was not the result of some important theological principle, but of being unable to agree on the timing of the Easter celebrations. It is probable that there were other matters that separated the Christians in the early centuries - but the reason for the split lay in something as trivial as the date on which Easter was to be celebrated - and then also Christmas.

Over the centuries of the history of the church this kind of behaviour has been repeated over and over - today it seems that any reason will do, for a new church to spring up, which is the 'True Bible-teaching Church of Christ'. I'm not for one moment saying that the separations in the church have only happened on the grounds of trivial matters - after all the Reformation did not simply happen, because Luther and others did not like the vestments that priests wore. But even in the midst of fighting for the truth of God's Word, Luther's intention was not to start a new church, but to reform the church - to bring it back to the truth of the Gospel message.

It is this thinking - it is the heart of Paul's message to us here - which must guide us in our relationships in the church. We have to be careful not to classify people as either being too liberal in their interpretation of Scripture - or too narrow-minded in the way in which they read God's Word. It is so easy to fall into one group or the other - and to accuse the others of 'having given up their principles' or of 'just being fundamentalist'.

At the time Paul wrote, it appears that what people ate or drank was being made to be important. People were being judged by what they ate - or how they prepared their food. Those who came from a Jewish background may have felt that their traditions of preparing kosher food was something they

they could not part with. Others - perhaps from a non-Jewish background - did not have these traditions. Were they not free now from these Old Testament rules of what to eat - or what not. Paul agrees - but God's Kingdom is not defined by what we eat or not. This kingdom is defined by taking into consideration what others feel.

Not being intolerant - the opposite of that is not a tolerance which sweeps all differences under the carpet. Because of course there are areas in which we cannot and may not compromise. That is important to remember. We are not called on here to replace intolerance with a tolerance for all kinds of things. But we are called on to live in harmony with one another. We are called on to make sure that we do not allow things like food or clothing, music or other traditions to separate us from other Christians, where we actually have the same beliefs.

Paul shows here what the opposite of intolerance is, when he says that we are to live **a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**. This life does not concentrate on what we think, on how we believe things should be done in the church - instead we look first of all to God - to the **goodness** he has endowed us with. The literal translation of the word here is 'righteousness' - unfortunately it seems that we often add a little word before this: 'self-righteousness'!

The **goodness** - the righteousness - we are to live by is the fact that we have been brought into a new and right relationship with God. We no longer have to strive to be accepted by him by what we do - by observing a certain set of rules or by doing things in a certain way in church, whether that is a dress-code, or a certain way of doing the liturgy.

The good news is that God accepts us because of what Christ did for us. So, its no longer about our efforts to please God - those so often end up in us becoming judgmental about all who don't see things quite like we do.

What Christ has given us is a **peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**. We have been given peace with God, and now we may be at peace with ourselves, and therefore also with the people around us. When we keep on comparing ourselves to others - when we keep on looking for mistakes in the other person - we have

no real peace. The peace God gives us, shows itself in the way I am prepared to give something up, because that will benefit another Christian. God's peace in my life becomes visible, when I can adapt what I do, not to exclude others, but to include them - to demonstrate that Christ's love truly binds us together as his people.

Where is our **joy in the Holy Spirit**? Where is the joy we have been given as children of God in our lives here in our congregation and in the church as a whole? The striving to be better than others, to prove that we are right and they - obviously - are not, robs us of joy.

God has called us - each on of us individually -, but he called us to be part of a family. He called us to support on another - for the strong to help the weak, for the rich to help care for the poor. At the same time, the weak may receive this help without losing face, the poor are helped so that they do not lose their sense of worth. Our worth is not measured by how much we have, but by what God has given us.

If you serve Christ with this attitude, you live to please God. The strange thing is that we strive to please God with our rules and the way we do things, and we end up with a joyless attitude. We please God, when we don't demand that our point of view is always right, but follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We please God, when we recognise the other person, and are not only concerned with the **I**. We please God when we strive for fellowship with other Christians rather than looking for ever new reasons to be separated from them.

Living in God's kingdom frees us from the straight-jacket which does not allow us to change. We have been accepted by God, and he has received me as part of his family - although there may be a number of things in my life which he does not approve of. But because I am with him, I can be changed - and I can also accept and honour those whom he has accepted - in spite of the differences on the surface which are still present.

We please God, by living the change he has made possible in our lives, and so to experience the joy of being a Christian together with all those he has called.