**Romans sermon series**

**14th April 2024** 10.30am Holy Communion St Peter’s, Stonesby.

**Reading: Excepts from Romans 13 & 14**

1. **Community**

**13**Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. **2**For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. **5**Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities. **6**This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. **7**Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

**8**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another,. Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

**14**Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. **2**One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. **3**The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. **4**

**13**Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. **14**  I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. **15**If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. **16**Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. **17**For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, **18**because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

**19**Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

**Talk**

So we are drawing near to the end of our mountain climb and descent, as today we think about the penultimate chapters of Romans – chapters 13 & 14. Today we are considering ‘the return to community’ – or in my paraphrase:

‘if all this is so, then how do we live?’

And the key verse is Romans 14:17 – The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Having walked and climbed though Paul’s writings on sin, salvation, freedom and mystery etc he now seeks to help people live out their new faith in everyday life.

*If all this is so, then how do we live?*

Remembering that Paul’s audience would have been a real mix of people, ex pagans, Messianic Jews, slaves, citizens, rich and poor, of all ages and backgrounds – the vital question is – how do we live? day to day, week by week, on and on as Christ’s church – how do we live in such a way as to overcome differences and beliefs, assured faith and ‘baby’ faith, traditions and orthodoxies?

Paul deals with these everyday issues by identifying them as belonging to two separate but overlapping realms. Believers in Christ belong to two realms: the secular world and the Kingdom of God. It’s like having dual citizenship – anyone here have that? My brother David has both UK and Australian citizenship – and he has accountabilities in both countries. Most of us are probably just citizens of the UK. But actually we all have dual citizenship – of the UK because we are born here, and of the Kingdom of God because we have been born again through faith into God’s family.

And so, like the early Christians in Rome, we too have dual responsibilities, and that is what Paul is talking about in Romans 13 and 14. In chapter 13 he deals with our responsibilities as citizens of the world, and in chapter 14 our responsibilities as citizens of the Kingdom of God. It may be ‘everyday’ stuff, but it is important stuff!

There is a lot to cover and think about, so we will only be touching on Paul’s key points here, I encourage you to go and read the chapters for yourselves at a later moment.

In our society the state and the church are largely separate. In Paul’s day the Roman empire combined religious and secular government in one. Roman citizens were expected to worship a plethora of gods, and the Emperor as well. That was how life was, all combined under one authority, and everyone knew it. Jesus and his disciples would have been very familiar with it. When we look at Jesus though we see a very different pattern of behaviour, which must have appeared completely radical to those around him. In Mark 12:16-17 we hear the account of Jesus’ holding up a denarius before people and asking, Whose head is this? Caeser’s, they reply. Well then, give to Caeser what is Caeser’s, and to God what is God’s. In other words you have dual citizenship – give to the rulers what is theirs, but to God what belongs to God.

And although our society is run differently to that of Rome, we are still faced with the same questions. How do we live as Christians in a secular and often dark society? What are our responsibilities to government, what happens when these appear to clash with our responsibilities to God? How do we hold a clear conscience as citizens but also as children of God?

Paul gives some very clear answers:

Government and those in authority, he says, are servants of God. They may not know it but they are only in power because God has permitted it. God uses them to administer justice, to work for the good of people and the state. So, if they are servants of God, then we are to fulfil our roles as citizens humbly and peaceably. You may well think, but what if they are doing terrible job, or are tyrants? Well, remember what the Roman government was like? Paul was not writing to those living in freedom and democracy, but under oppression and fear of those in power. And yet Paul writes as he does… We should pay our taxes, keep laws designed to protect ourselves and others (speeding), not get into too much debt, obey health and safety requirements (I hear you groan). We do this not because we may always think they are necessary, but because government is under God’s greater power. We are children of God and it honours Him when we obey the laws of the state.

But I hear you say, what if what government requires clashes with what we know of God to be true? Then if that is truly the case, we put God first. In this country we are pretty free in how we worship, how we live as Christians, but there are many sisters and brothers in other countries who are restricted in their faith – and they have to make tough choices. Sometimes even choices that lead to death. Alexie Navalny, in opposition to Putin, was a man of faith so it is said, he used the Beatitudes as his creed for life. His opposition brought about his murder, he died because he believed his country could be a better place. Living by what we truly believe can be very tough.

We are not called to this sacrifice in our country - but living according to the law does not mean that we cannot object or protest. Indeed where we see injustice and oppression we can, indeed should, raise our voice for justice and fairness in government, at all levels.

So Paul is clear as to how we should live in society as citizens of our country.

He then goes on to discuss how we live with each other, as citizens of God’s Kingdom. Remembering again the complete mix of individuals in the early church, from so many different backgrounds and cultures. There was a real risk of divisions and disputes as they struggled to understand what this new life meant for them and required of them.

Again Paul tackles this head on – but from the perspective of love. He does not lay down specific laws about living, but makes it clear that love of each other and God must underlie all that we do. If we are God’s children, bought in love, then we should live like this – to owe nothing to anyone except to love them. Putting other people first, before your own needs or traditions, Paul stresses, is really important. He puts it in the context of food and what people eat. Those from a Jewish background had been used to many, many food rules, and to them eating certain types of food would have been unacceptable. To the Romans with their pagan background, any food was OK. Such behaviours might well have started to cause difficulties and disputes, dividing people and causing splits in God’s communities. It is better Paul says, to deny your own wishes or ways, if by pursuing them you cause another Christian to falter in their faith.

We might think it trivial now, but actually if we take the underlying principle, Paul’s issue becomes clear. As soon as one Christian group declares ‘these things are right and acceptable’ and ‘those things are not’ they create rules by which they judge other Christians. And let’s face it, Christian communities through the ages have been very good at creating rules which then exclude others: the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren is just one rather extreme example. There are many much lesser ones but which have also caused pain and separation. That is why love should drive everything we do.

Because to a lesser extent we all do it – we worship like this, and any other way isn’t right, we don’t drink, and so those who do can’t be real Christians, etc etc. Often the rules are about how we interpret scripture, but they are often about things which don’t actually matter that much – and this is Paul’s point. Many things are disputable, but the key thing is unity. We can agree to disagree on many things, but still be united and live in love. Sadly we are not always very good, even at that. BUT if we seek to live in love we can also live in generosity and grace towards others, because we are not looking out solely for ourselves. This is a lesson I have learnt, am still learning, over the years.

That is not to say however that all beliefs are up for grabs. Again Paul is clear – there are key aspects to our faith which are not open to question: the person of Jesus’, his life, death and resurrection, God and the Holy Spirit – the beliefs we recite in the creed each time we meet. These are key tenets of our faith and indisputable, but there are many other things which we choose to live by which don’t actually matter that much to God. There is a radical freedom in Christianity which surprises people. People expect rules but actually there are very few – except to love one another - By this the world will know that we are his disciples. It surprises even us, but it shouldn’t, when you look at the many and mightily various ways Christianity is lived out across the world and the ages – so many differences, but all acceptable to God. What God longs for is people who believe and seek to live out their lives in unity, love and peace – that is what matters.

This radical acceptance of each other, this love which transcends difference and traditions, this willingness to lay down our lives for each other, this is what marks out God’s people. And this is something that the world can’t understand, finds stupid, or degrading, or irrelevant. In a ‘me first’ society, giving up your own needs or wishes for the good of another might seem ridiculous – but that is the way of life to which God has called us, as he called the Christians in Rome.

As Paul states:

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

May we, by the grace of God, learn to live such lives in greater and greater reality.

Amen