

15TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: ROMANS 14:1-12

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?"

REFLECT:

The reading chosen for this week continues last week's themes of conflict and community. Paul seems to be addressing an issue close to my own heart - a disagreement between members of the church in Rome about whether or not to eat meat.

Most of you will know that I'm vegan: I choose to try not to consume any products that are derived from animals. I made this decision about 6 years ago now. It is deeply held because it accords with my core values of compassion and pacifism.

The trouble, though, with any stance that's based on what we see as moral or theological imperatives (whether it be our politics, our views on same-sex marriage, or abortion, or the military,

or baptism...), is that it's easy to become blinkered and self-righteous. And, worse still, to begin to dehumanize those with different views.

The photo overleaf was taken at an animal rights march in London in 2016. Carolyn and I were there with our homemade placards. It felt uplifting to be among like-minded people. But there was a moment when the march passed a McDonalds restaurant and the protest turned ugly. Marchers thronged at the window and began hammering on the glass, shouting "MURDERERS!" I caught a glimpse of the face of a frightened little boy and his bewildered dad who had been sharing a meal together at a table just inside. One moment the crowd had been chanting about peace and compassion - the next it was modelling anything but.

Paul strikes me as a pretty opinionated guy. Even in this passage recommending "do not judge" he can't help nailing his own colours to the mast by characterizing one side of the argument as "those who are weak in faith". He's not telling the Roman Christians not to do what they believe to be right, not to speak up against perceived injustice, not to live according to their consciences. In fact he acknowledges that each one does what they believe to be right "in honour of the Lord."

So much of Jesus' teaching and living seems to have been about re-humanizing the 'other' and the 'enemy.' It's OK to disagree. Even to disagree deeply and passionately. But we are to do so within a wider framework of grace and love (and within the Church, unity). We are to love one another, just as each one of us is loved by God.

CONNECT:

Our current situation is fraught with difficult decisions: when to wear a mask, when and how to gather, how to balance the risks of Covid against the damage done by lock-down and isolation. Anxiety and other emotions are running high, and it becomes easy to blame others or judge their actions. Let's pray for love, grace and compassion to prevail, and to hold us together.

PRAY:

- Who are your 'enemies'? Try to pray for them. Ask God to help you love them.
- With what words and thoughts have we dehumanized or misrepresented others? Confess them to God, and ask for eyes of love through which to see the world.

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:
www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.