

Romans 14:1-12

Should Christians be vegetarians?

Quite possibly. After all, what gives us the right to treat animals as simply there for our convenience, to be bred and killed simply for our consumption? Are they not created by God to be splendidly themselves? And even if you accept killing animals, could anything excuse the conditions under which, generally speaking, the slaughter is done in modern Western society? There's a reason we choose not to see it. Number three, every meat dish involves more CO₂, more land use, more water consumption than every plant-based food – between 10 and 100 times more. No wonder that this week, the first UK national citizens assembly on climate change said that we should all reduce our meat consumption by up to 40%. There's a good case for saying vegetarianism is a Christian duty.

If, like me, you know all this, but you're looking for a loophole, then hurrah! St. Paul to the rescue. "Some believe in eating anything," he says in Romans 14, "while the weak eat only vegetables." The weak eat only vegetables. Not the physically weak, mind, Paul isn't saying that. You could, perhaps, be a veggie with rippling abs and biceps. You could have a physique like mine. But you would still, says Paul, be weak in faith. Not really a solid, mature Christian. Nonetheless, the rest of the Church – the strong, carefree carnivores - shouldn't look down on you. We will welcome those who are weak in faith. If you feel you have to be a veggie, fine. We know you don't. But we don't mind if you are – and by the same token, Paul urges, those who are veggies must not despise the rest of us. Are we not all servants of the same master?

That, my friends, is an example of how to misread the Bible by knowing nothing about its context. Paul is not talking about what we know as vegetarianism *at all*. Hardly anyone back then worried about the morality of killing animals, or climate change. Nobody thought that eating meat was a bad thing to do. Jews, of course, worried about certain *kinds* of meat: pork was ritually impure and you shouldn't eat it if you wanted to be a good Jew. Some Jewish Christians probably still worried about that. Gentile Christians, meanwhile, might have worried about eating meat when you didn't know where it had been – it might have been used in a pagan sacrifice, and then consuming it might implicate you in that sacrifice, even in your ignorance. Best just to avoid meat altogether. That's why some Christians were 'vegetarian', and why it became a source of tension when some were, and others weren't.

Paul thinks the 'vegetarians' are weak in faith because fundamentally they're insecure. They have a such a weak sense of their new identity in Jesus that they're seriously worried eating the wrong piece of meat might jeopardise it. For Paul, a Christian is someone whose whole life is rooted in God and Jesus. That love and loyalty is the master theme of their existence. It can't be threatened by a piece of meat, and if people think it can, that only shows how much they have to learn. Still, at least their anxiety is precisely because of their love for God and Jesus. They're trying to do him honour. They may be immature, but they're still members of the family.

So this passage has zero relevance to our contemporary questions about vegetarianism. But is there *anything* like that issue of vegetables today? Is there any behaviour or action which some Christians get very anxious about, because they think it threatens their very identity, and about which others think the anxious need to chill out?

Well, yes - several. So, for instance some people will not even buy a raffle ticket, because what is a raffle but a kind of gambling? And Christians don't gamble. Others might only ever listen to Christian music. Secular music, they think, especially pop music, is propaganda for a secular world view, and secular ethics. You put garbage into your mind, and you'll get garbage out. And what about sexuality? Might the great reluctance of many Christians - let's face it, *most* Christians - to celebrate same-sex love, to host a gay wedding here at St. Lawrence, for instance, be another example of anxiety? If we do this, will our fundamental identity as Christians will start to slip away?

And this is where it all starts to get complicated. We find it easy to say: 'oh, for goodness sake, it's just a piece of meat. What's the big deal?'. It would be bizarre for a Christian these days to be fussed about that, at least for the same reasons they were back in first century Rome. Jewish diet laws and pagan sacrifices no longer concern us. But gambling is different. At best, it's a waste of money, and one person's harmless flutter is for others the beginning of a very long, fast and dangerous slope. Perhaps we *should* be a bit stricter. And on pop music, why shouldn't Christians be careful about what they listen to? You can't spend years pumping the values of the culture into young people's ears, especially on matters sexual, and expect it not to change the way they think and act. As for gay marriage Well, more in a moment.

First, though, a more general comment. I suspect that if Paul was writing to us - by and large, very laid back, very liberal, very at ease in our culture Christians - he'd strike a different note than that he does in Romans 14. There he was talking to people who worried too much, who were *too* anxious about Christian identity, and about making sure that their outward behaviour was the right behaviour. Is that our problem? I think Paul would say 'no'. They worried too much; perhaps we worry too little. Perhaps we don't see when identity really is at stake. We're too busy feeling comfortable and at home in our culture, too busy looking down on and patronising the anxious, the fussy and the conservative, to ask whether they might in fact have a point.

Which brings me back to the subject of gay marriage. Now, personally speaking, I'm in favour. I haven't always been, and I still worry about it a lot - much more than many of you, I fear, would like. But fundamentally, I am in favour. I hope, over time, that the Church changes its mind.

However there is a very big 'however'. One of the most alarming things about the sexuality debate is the tone in which most of the people on my side, the 'liberal' side, use about the people who disagree. They're homophobes. They're bigots. They're stupid. They're uneducated. They're old. They're *African*. We speak as if our position is blindingly self-evident, and that only the wicked or stupid could disagree. We do that knowing full well we are talking about pretty much the whole of the Christian tradition from day one, and the vast majority of Christians alive today. Now of course, some of them *are* homophobes. Some of them are wicked and stupid and all the rest of it. Like us, in fact. But to say that they *all* are, or even that most of them are – that is one heck of a charge. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ!

Well, what would Paul say? Well, first of course, he'd tell us – if we're on the liberal side of this argument – that we're wrong. Paul was not in favour of gay marriage, and there's no point pretending otherwise. But leaving that rather big issue on one side, secondly, he'd tell us this: Even if you're right. Even if this question is a bit like vegetables in first century Rome (and I don't think it is, says Paul!), *even then* you're wrong. You're wrong, even when you're right, because you despise. You're wrong because you cannot grasp that people who disagree with you aren't stupid, and aren't wicked. They're Christians. They think what they do for Christian reasons, out of love and honour for God and Jesus. Disagree with them by all means. Show them, if you can, why love for God and Jesus brings you to a different place. Have it out with them, fully and frankly. But despise them at your peril.

So there's the take away for today. The mark of Christian maturity is not just how un-anxious and unthreatened you are by things. Sometimes, all that means is that you're asleep. A better clue is how seriously you take, and how much you respect, those who radically disagree with you. Right now, people are very bad at this: we find it almost impossible to argue with each other about anything – about Brexit, about Boris, about gender and facemasks and race – without starting to sneer and shout. Without, if we're honest, starting to hate. Well, let the Church be the place where the world sees it done. Let's start treating our brothers and sisters who disagree with the reverence they deserve. Even in the middle of our fights, let the word go out – 'look at these Christians. See how they love one another.' What a witness that would be.

To God be the glory, forever and ever.