

Sermon on Romans 14, vs 1-13: Sitting in God's Universal Grace at the bottom of the stairs.

22nd Sept. 10am

What was that all about? I am sure we have all asked and been asked that question?

It's one of those questions that changes in meaning depending on the tone used - *What was that all about?* Might be an expression of a genuine desire to gain knowledge;

On the other hand - *What was that all about?* can also suggest quite the opposite, responding from indignation, anger, a feeling of affront or worse, a sense of superiority and a closed mind.

I remember vividly experiencing a feeling of indignation and affront as a small child.

My exasperated mother sat her wayward child on the bottom stair with a plate of congealing shepherd's pie.

"Sit there until you have eaten it." she said.

To be fair to my Mum she had a lot of mouths to feed and had grown up during a time of rationing. She was, after all, the parent and in charge.

But I was eight years old, stubborn and I knew best - would not, could not, eat that meat.

In amongst the resentment and tears on both sides, I am sure that we both were left wondering..... *"What was that all about?"*

What was that all about? Is, I suggest, a legitimate question to follow both the gospel reading and the epistle reading we have heard this morning.

The gospel reading was a puzzling parable, about rascally behaviour having merit.

Jesus typically drawing his listeners into a familiar setting and then he turns expectation on its head.

His story is about shrewd, but dishonest, business management and worldliness, yet Jesus takes a positive perspective, rather than the negative response we might naturally fall into. - *What was all that about?*

In his letter to the Roman Church, Paul's words challenge and instruct on matters of faith, holiness, salvation and judgement, drawn, it seems, from a suggestion that meat eaters are strong and vegetable eaters are weak.

As the vegan in the house..... My immediate response is *What was that all about?*

So, I am going to leave the gospel's rascal in his place for now –there is much meat to be chewed on in that parable, but I am going to focus on the epistle reading.

I am afraid that telling a vegan they are weak for only eating vegetables is like red rag to a bull,you might want to open your bibles at Romans 14.

Let me drop the chip from my shoulder, of course, Paul's words are not really all about extolling the virtues of steak over tofu.

Paul's concern is, however, about health and wellbeing. The health and wellbeing of the church in Rome.

His whole letter to the people of that Church unpacks in some depth core theological themes of the Christian gospel.

Paul's message to the Romans is that these theological themes should not just be understood, but also lived out in day to day life, especially in the way that the people of Christ's church relate one to another.

Rome was a diverse place and the church was made up of both non-Jewish (that is Gentile) and Jewish (that is those whose heritage comes from the tribes of Israel.)

Within any group of people, differences can become divisive and breed intolerance.

Intolerance can lead to conflict, to hardened attitudes, to exclusion and to superior judgement.

Paul is keenly alert to this danger, perhaps he has already been made aware of examples where this was beginning to emerge.

He writes to remind this community of faithful people of God's universal grace

Those whose practise of faith allows them to eat anything are those, both Gentile and Jew, who understand that when Christ died on the cross, the many ways in which man had taken God's laws and embellished them with numerous man-made conditions, died with him.

They are strong because they have grasped fully the significance of Christ's death for daily living.

Those who maintain some of the religious practices of the past, such as abstaining from meat, or rigidly observing the Sabbath, but who nevertheless understand that their salvation comes through Christ, are no less Christian.

Their weakness is that they have not yet been able to grasp fully the significance of Christ's death for daily living, their re-birth into the new law is work in progress.

So Paul writes to address the kind of views that say "my understanding is superior to yours because your understanding is weak"

Or, "I regard you in contempt because of your disregard for tradition and the proper way to come before God."

Don't look down, disparage, dismiss, or judge each other.

That's Paul's instruction.

Do remember that you all seek to serve the one true God, through Jesus Christ.

That is Paul's challenge.

There may be differences in the way we seek to serve, but the common bottom line is that our faith means that we live to serve God, not to serve ourselves, and that we will all stand before God's judgement just as we all stand together in his grace.

Paul wants the church in Rome to reflect the universal grace in which they stand.

He wants them to demonstrate in their relationships with each other that same sense of grace through mutual respect.

More than that, he wants them to understand that God seeks to make everyone strong enough to stand in their service of him, no matter what weaknesses others may perceive.

Fast forward to the beginning of chapter 15.

Here Paul writes, "We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."

Fast forward across the centuries.

Forget the Church in Rome, think about the Church in Bookham.

How do we measure up in terms of the gospel of God's universal grace?

Into what relationships and matters might we give consideration to meat and veg, to perceived strengths and weaknesses?.....

...might we consider whether we are focused on serving God or whether, in fact, we are focused on serving ourselves?

In our community over the past few weeks I have been aware of a situation which has raised issues of difference and judgement.

Sadly, focused around the last days, death and funeral of someone from the traveller community.

Differences of cultural approach and expectation, strong views about what is acceptable and what isn't, and fears born of both ignorance and experience, have led to some strong and intolerant points of view being expressed on social media.

A culturally different expression of mourning and the marking of a respected life, has not received universal respect itself.

Rather there are those who have expressed indignation at an intrusion into the neighbourhood, and seen only an aberration of the norm.

I would like to feel that as an individual I have the capacity to model God's universal grace in my own attitudes, behaviour and relationships.

But I wonder, were I close to a situation that concerned me, that ignited fear or a sense of injustice in me, would I and could I truly exemplar Christ?

I suspect I would fall short of the mark. That stubborn eight year old still lingers on the bottom stair.

My weakness is not my vegan diet, more likely it sits in my lack of courage as a Christian to stand tall and bear witness to God's grace.

I would like to feel that as a Church Fellowship, we embrace that sense of universal grace.

That we know well our strengths and weaknesses and unreservedly encourage one another to serve God from both.

Again, I suspect we fall short of the mark.

We may know that we all belong to the Lord, but to feel it and to live it, that's harder to do.

We are, after all, a diverse group of people, with different expectations, different experiences in life, different views and understandings.

We may be a collection of people seeking to serve God, but we are also a collection of people who have our own intolerances, and irritations, our own sense of what is right and proper.

Take a moment to have an honest ponder.

Pause.....

Universal grace does not come easy, does it.

Experience tells me that it certainly doesn't come easy when change is on the horizon.

And undoubtedly change is on the Horizon.

We are living through a time of considerable political, economic and social change in the world around us.

In this church community we know that change must come if the Gospel news is to continue to be shared and revealed to our neighbours, their children and their children's children.

Which is why I think it all the more important that we don't stop at simply acknowledging that universal grace doesn't come easy, but that we actively seek to address it, find ways to grow it.

To labour the question, *What's that all about?*

It's about taking time to appraise what is strong and what is weak in our faith understanding, both as individuals seeking to serve God and as a worshipping community seeking to serve God together.

It's about identifying and owning both our strengths and our weaknesses with humility and with honesty.

It's about recognising those times when we make a response that is more about serving ourselves than it is about serving God.

And when we do, it's about placing that in God's hands through prayer and seeking the strength to redress the balance.

It's about continually challenging ourselves to allow tolerance to grow and put difference aside.

It's about critically thinking through those words of Paul in verse four, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" and what he means when he says "the Lord is able to make them stand."

It's about being honest with ourselves about times when we fail to see others with sufficient respect to ward off contempt.

It's about recognising that even as we struggle to accept some others, God has already done so and gladly welcomes their desire to serve.

It's about finding within ourselves that same sense of welcome and gladness

It's about encouraging each other as we seek to grasp more fully the significance of Christ's death for our own daily living

It's about remembering that God will one day meet each one of us at the bottom of his stairs, and the question he will be asking of our lives is this:

What was that all about?