

Give us ears to hear and hearts to listen. Amen.

Of all the letters believed to be truly written by Paul, the letter to the community in Rome is the only one not written to a church he had founded and knew well. Paul wrote to the Romans as an introduction and to prepare them for his arrival in their city. A bit like an agenda with reports and material sent around before a parish council meeting.

Paul is most concerned about telling the Romans about the issues of justification and salvation and that one of the consequences of our justification and salvation in and through Christ is that we will be transformed. Not only physically on the day of resurrection, but in our hearts, minds, and spirits as well.

Up to this point, some of the things Paul has talked about are what it means to believe in God, what it means to have faith, the practicalities of living in community, and the redemption through Jesus Christ that can be accessed through faith and action. And today it's all about pitting meat eaters against vegetarians!

No, wait. That doesn't sound right.

That's what it reads like though, doesn't it? “The weak eat only vegetables”. That's what it says. After all of Paul's talk about family, community, being welcoming to the stranger, loving the neighbour, forgiving the enemy...he's got something against those who choose not to eat meat? Not really. Paul is talking about the culture of eating meat, or more accurately, eating food that is unclean, not kosher.

Jewish religious laws around food were pretty sticky and as Paul tries to bring more people towards conversion to Christianity, one of his points is that having faith in Jesus is more than just following a bunch of rules. It means caring about people more than caring about the food you put in your mouth. That said, I don't think the people who created the lectionary wanted us to start a debate between being a carnivore and being a vegetarian. There has to be more meat to this reading!

This passage is more than just about eating meat or vegetables. It's about division and differences.

This is about a Roman community that was both Jewish and Christian and they were struggling to figure out who was right, who was more faithful. For example, should they honour the last day, Saturday, as the sabbath, or the Lord's Day, Sunday?

What Paul was trying to say here is that these divisions that were both frustrating and meaningful shouldn't divide us fully. The community is what matters, and we should hold together in love. It's love that binds us together.

We can dispute and we can argue but that's not the point. Paul said to not just tolerate those who are weak in faith, but to show hospitality, to go the extra mile and make the weak feel welcomed. And he isn't trying to say that some people have better faith or more faith than others. But he is saying that we should be welcoming to all people, even those with whom you disagree.

Jesus didn't come to die and live again so that we could argue over how to baptize or whether to eat meat or on what day we should celebrate. Jesus came so that we might have life, so that he might be the Lord of the living and the dead.

And yet we judge one another, and we divide one another, sometimes even saying these divisions are done in God's name. It is tough to praise God if you are busy passing judgment on other people. And yet, that's often what we do.

While we might not be arguing about all the same things as Paul's audience anymore, there are still plenty of divisions within our churches. Will we sing praise music, or traditional hymns? Should we read from the NRSV, or the NIV (or the KJV or the CEB)? Will we have an open communion table, or will we deny certain people receiving the feast?

We also remain divided over things like the inclusion, acceptance, ordination, and blessing of women, people of colour, and 2SLGBTQIA+ persons. For every place that is truly affirming, there is a place that is not.

And just when you think progress is being made, society slides backwards in the conversation. Love the sinner, hate the sin. Right?

That statement assumes that being a woman, a person of colour, a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is a choice, and a sinful choice at that. None of these unique characteristics are a choice, but they are the way in which we are beautifully and wonderfully made by God.

None of them are a sin. White supremacy, hate speech, hate actions, racism - these are choices and sins. These are actions that need to be called out and exposed for the destructive lies they are, and those who continue to espouse them must be held accountable.

I understand Paul's call that we are to love, that love is ultimate, that love is everything. Easy enough for some, but what about those being rejected by society, by family, by community? That's the hard part. It's not about "anything goes". Loving everyone doesn't mean "everything goes".

This could too easily be interpreted as a sit back and, for the sake of the community, love everybody and don't rock the boat. I doubt Paul would be telling us not to rock the boat. Jesus was a great boat rocker and Paul was repeatedly thrown into prison. Rocking the boat is exactly what we need to do in order to bring justice to those on the margins. When a group of people want to cause harm to another group of people, we need to stand up and rock the boat.

Very few challenges in the Christian life can compare with the challenge of really loving one another despite how different we all are. However, at our core we are all children of God, created in God's image. God is the God of all people and God calls us to love and pray for our enemies and those who hate and persecute us.

To us, the enemies, the persecutors, and the haters are the people who are weak of faith. And we are called to welcome them to our table, just as Christ welcomed all sinners to his table.

Paul acknowledges that devout people can have radically different convictions and still be good and faithful people. It is too easy to judge each other, especially when society constantly barrages us with the idea that people are "less than" simply because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background.

But we need to resist demonizing each other and remember that we mere mortals have no right to judge.

Verse 12 in today's reading, "so then, each of us will be accountable to God." There is only one judge, and it isn't me, and it isn't us. If, in the end, I am wrong about who God intended for me to include, then I will answer to the Almighty on my final day.

Until then, all are truly welcome to my table because I believe that God calls us to live as a community that embraces all and sees all as equal, so that together our knees will bow before God.

We are all people called by grace and by God not to judge but to worship and to serve. Amen.