

A few years ago, I made the decision that I needed to cut down on my sugar intake. For decades I had out a teaspoon of sugar in my coffee and – despite my partial Scottish ancestry – at least a spoon on my morning porridge. It was a slow process involving half and then ¼ spoon in my coffee and honey in my porridge, but I got there and am preparing this sermon with a sugarless coffee by my side. Recently a friend came round for a socially distanced coffee and asked for milk and a spoon of sugar. To my amazement I caught myself thinking “surely you’re strong enough to manage without sugar!” Even as the thought flashed through my brain, I realised how hypocritical I was being. Just because I had chosen to make that decision - and had found it a bit of a struggle – that didn’t give me the right to judge this one choice – especially as they make many better than choices than me in their life.

As Christians we commit ourselves to following Jesus and obeying him in all we do. On the major level we understand that this means time with God in prayer and Bible study, it means loving one another with his generous love and forgiving each other as he has forgiven us. But once we start to put all this into practice life becomes far more complicated. In the bible we find general principles and myriad examples of those principles being applied – but how we translate those examples across cultures - and how we separate out principles from applications of principles is a life-time challenge. Sometimes we wish God would just tell us what the right way is as we try and balance different and competing priorities. If he did, life would be simpler – but **OH SO BORING!** As it is God has gifted us with brains and community to work out what following him means in our different contexts. Inevitably this results in us reaching different conclusions about where the priorities are in our lives and so behaving differently to one another, This in turn presents us with the challenge of how we deal with others making what we see as wrong choices. Sadly church history is full of examples where groups have simply divided around the rightness of their choices and rejection of those who work out their faith differently.

If only more churches saw the importance of our passage today (Romans 14:1-12) then so many divisions could have been avoided.

As we have been working through Paul’s letter to the Romans we have followed his argument, that all of us whatever our background or religious experience come to Jesus equally in need of his forgiveness and generous, undeserved love. Having

established that, his closing chapters apply this truth to how the church functioned and grew.

In chapter 14 Paul identified two areas where the Christians in Rome had made very different choices and how their treatment of one another was threatening division of the community. One was over the question of whether it was OK to eat meat and the other was over the importance of significant days. He gives us tantalisingly little detail about what the controversies were actually about. The vegetarian/meat eating difference would not have been ecological as it is for some today. It might have been the same problem that occurred in Corinth where the meat sold in the market had all been offered to other gods and some feared that eating it would be tantamount to worshipping these gods, or it might have been an issue that arose from the various prohibitions that we find in the Old Testament. The issues of keeping certain days may refer to the strict Jewish Sabbath rules which gentile Christians would probably not have been willing to follow, or might refer to sharing in feast days that were not specifically Christian.

Whatever the actual details the important thing to note is that this was not a debate about either group choosing to deliberately go against God – but people coming to different conclusions about how to follow Jesus in a multi-cultural environment. Some Christians had a faith that enabled them to take a liberal view about such issues as food and celebrations whereas others found that observance in these practical areas strengthened their faith.

So who were right? The answer for Paul was both groups were right, if they had come to those decisions as part of their honest desire to follow Jesus. Those in the wrong were those who dared to judge others by their standards – and not leave that judgement to Jesus.

Paul reiterates the challenge for all Christians is not to just worship Jesus in church – but to do everything (even the most mundane and non-spiritual tasks) as though we were doing them for Jesus. The problem is that we don't always know what Jesus wants of us and the factors that determine our decisions may be different. In Rome it would seem that some Christians believed it important to hold on to some traditions from the Old Testament, such as making the Sabbath a high priority, while others believed it was important to celebrate our freedom from law and would have been much more lax about how they treated the sabbath. Whilst Paul would have

encouraged discussion and debate, he also refused to let these decisions determine the nature of the church – rather they were to celebrate that each had reached their conclusions in their desire to follow Jesus.

What Paul was not saying, was that it didn't really matter what you do – just do what feels good to you! In v6 he said “He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

So how do we decide how to live for God.

2 important considerations are:

Scripture

Effect on others

**Scripture** The importance of regular study of the bible on our own and with friends cannot be overstressed. Although there are key passages which give specific instruction – it is as we immerse ourselves in the history of God's people working out how to live for God that we get a growing understanding of the mind of God which continually challenges our presuppositions and expectations.

As we do so differing priorities will lead to different choices - and the challenge for us as a church is to live alongside those who come to different conclusions – even if the issues seem especially important to us. A few years ago a parent, sharing my belief that baptism, whether of infant or older, is a once in a lifetime event, asked me what they should do because their daughter had joined a Baptist church at university. She had been told that her infant baptism wasn't sufficient, and she needed to be baptised by immersion. This she had decided to do and had invited her parents. Although I fundamentally disagree with this teaching my advice was that they should rejoice that she had made this decision to be known as a Christian, and that this theological difference paled into insignificance compared to the importance of supporting her decision to be known as a Christian at university. I would love to see a bit more Romans 14 on some of the big issues that affect the church. One of the big dividing issues at present is sexuality. Some committed Christians believe that the bible only allows sexual intimacy within the marriage of a man and a woman – other equally committed Christians believe that there is no biblical basis for preventing two gay men or two gay women entering into a life-long committed relationship. I long for the day when our churches don't have to choose sides but recognise the validity of each other's relationship with God and that the

different views are still arrived at with integrity. When we achieve this, we can truly welcome all as Jesus welcomes us.

### **Effect on others**

Our behaviour doesn't just affect our relationship with God – it also impacts on others. The demonstrations in America claiming it is their freedom not to wear masks ignore the reality that freedom also comes with responsibility. Their supposed freedom to not wear a mask becomes a freedom to infect others. There are some actions which are not wrong in themselves, but the consequence on others makes them wrong. Here are a couple of examples from my own life to explain what I mean: Some of you may be aware that I will not buy raffle tickets and have not permitted their sale in church activities. The reason is not that I think raffles are evil, but I do think the hold gambling has on some is. I recognised a long time ago that for people who are addicted to gambling – even something as innocent as a raffle can entice them back in – so I have chosen to keep even the very thin end of the wedge away from the church and from my life. When I was in East London helping to plant a church, I became aware that many of the people we were in contact with were struggling with alcohol, so for several years I became tea-total. Now I am no longer in that situation I am happy to drink socially.

We are all responsible before God for the decisions about how we worship God and how we live our lives. We wrestle with what the Bible teaches us and with what the impact of our decisions will have on others and decide to do so what we believe to be right even if other Christians disagree. At the same time, we choose to live in relationship with those with whom we disagree recognising that, in our relationship with Jesus, and in our common humanity there is more that unites us than that which divides.