

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Advent 2 A     December 5<sup>th</sup> 2010

Romans 15.4-13     (Matthew 3.1-12)

If there had been a *Jerusalem Daily Mail* in the first century, and if it had shown even the slightest interest in the inner conflicts of the new sect of Christians, (two very big 'ifs!'), it would no doubt have described St Paul in outraged tones as a 'Liberal softie'. And if the *Rome Guardian* had shown a similar interest, it perhaps would have said of Paul that, though he belonged to a lunatic sect of a benighted religion, at least he was less socially conservative and better company at a dinner party than some of his fanatical co-believers.

It may seem a bit fantastic now to consider that Paul – whom some think of as rather hard-line, and who is much loved by conservative Christians – was, in the terms of his own time, on the liberal wing of things. But, of course, we know that these journalistic terms, 'liberal' and 'conservative,' applied with such broad brush strokes to our faith

by people who scarcely understand it, are very inadequate, and often misleading. And it's even worse when Christians hurl these terms as insults at each other.

So, let's get behind the caricature language, and look at where Paul actually stood on issues which were controversial in the church of his day – the positions he took which might have tempted modern journalists to call him liberal – although we know there was something much deeper at stake in his thinking than mere keeping up with the times.

It's well-known to most of us, I imagine, that as far as keeping the Jewish Law in its outward manifestations was concerned, Paul believed that Christians were free from the necessity to conform. He believed passionately in the law of *love*, of course, which he considered the inner and essential meaning of the Law; but as for things like requiring circumcision of newly converted Christian men from Gentile backgrounds, or keeping the round of the Jewish festivals, or eating Kosher – all these he considered unnecessary for his converts. Indeed, if you read his letter to Christians in Galatia it's clear that he considered these requirements as

distractions, and worse than distractions – actual obstacles to putting one’s whole faith in Christ for our salvation. Other Christians – more conservative, we might call them – came travelling round the Roman world from their base in Palestine, trying to convince new Christians that everything the Jewish Law demanded was now laid on them, too – for the way of Jesus, the Messiah was, obviously, an off-shoot of Judaism. These people Paul opposed as false apostles – and the conflict with them was sharp and long- every bit as serious as any conflict within our own church today.

Nevertheless there’s a very interesting story, tucked away in Acts, about a time when Paul involved himself in very strict and quite burdensome Jewish practice for the sake of harmony, when he went back on a visit to Jerusalem. It’s there in Acts chapter 21, if you want to read it, and it tells of the time when the Jerusalem church leaders said to him, ‘Look, Paul, some people here are very concerned about stories that you’re telling people to ignore the Jewish Law. Just to prove that you still value it, would you mind going to the Temple with four of

our members who’ve taken a Nazirite vow (which meant growing their hair and not touching the fruit of the vine, as laid out in the Book of Numbers) – and now they’ve come to the end of the period of their vow, and need to make offerings in the Temple, go through a rite of purification and have their heads shaved. Would you mind just going along and taking part in the ritual with them, and paying for the offerings, just to show you respect the ritual law as much as the next man?’ And, you know, he did that (which must have cost him a good deal of money, apart from anything else, because the required offerings were quite expensive.) So, in this – for the sake of peace in the Church - he was prepared to ‘make himself all things to all men’.

Now, if we look, as it were, in the other direction, there were issues for the Church arising not just from conflicts about Jewish Law, but also from anxieties about the Roman religion of many gods. Because – as I expect you know – there was the custom in Roman society of making sacrifices to the gods in their temples, and then selling some of the meat from the sacrificed animals on the market, for people to take home for their dinners. And,

perhaps unsurprisingly, there were new Christians who had scruples and anxieties about this: wouldn't buying meat which had been sacrificed to the false gods somehow implicate you in their worship?

Malcolm and I once knew someone who'd been a missionary in India, and had been very influential in writing the liturgy for the Church of South India when it was created out of several denominations in 1948. And it was a revolutionary liturgy in some ways – it reintroduced the ancient custom, that nearly the whole church had abandoned centuries before, of having the President at communion standing behind the altar and facing the people. We nearly all do that now – but not in 1948. So why was it introduced in South India? Because some of the converts from Hinduism were uncomfortable about the idea of celebrating the holiest of services all facing the same way, and facing the cross on the wall above the holy table: it reminded them too much of devotions to the gods they used to make in the Hindu temples. They wanted a clean break in their custom and practices from what they'd done before.

That's the kind of feeling Roman Christians had who were anxious about eating meat which might come from the pagan temples. They felt a clean break was necessary.

But Paul's view was different – permissive: '*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question of conscience.. and if an unbeliever invites you to a meal...eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience*' he wrote in 1 Cor 10.25-27, but with an important caveat: hold back if eating will cause scandal to anyone else – that is to another believer; or, on the other hand, if an unbeliever goes out of his way to inform you that the meat before you is sacrificial, and thus, presumably, wants to manipulate you into implying that you approve of pagan religion. So Paul was, if you will forgive the broad brush kind of term we started with – a liberal, but a qualified kind of liberal. There were fellow-Christians who took a much harder line – more conservative – on such matters; and yet he was very far from saying 'anything goes'. For him, love, and welcoming each other – within the Church – was pre-eminent. And by 'welcoming', he meant being tolerant and sensitive.

So all this is the background to the passage we heard for our Epistle today – the passage from Romans which said, *‘Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.’* (Romans 15.7). He was writing in the heart of heated disputes, as hot and as fierce as those which are threatening to tear the Anglican Communion apart today. He was writing from the point of view which many might have described – if they’d had the journalistic language of today – as the more liberal position; but he was urging fellow-liberals to hold back, not to flaunt their sense of freedom in the face of others who had scruples and anxieties. He was quite clear in his mind which position was the position of stronger faith, but he wrote, earlier in chapter 15 than the passage we heard, *‘We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up our neighbour.’* (Romans 15.1,2). At the same time, he was urging the scrupulous, those he considered weaker in faith, not to pass judgement; indeed, he was urging both sides not to pass judgement *Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another ...’*

(Romans 14.13). He says this and similar words over and over again throughout Chapter 14 of Romans.

Now, what has all this to do with Advent? Why – it’s because, in the end, we all live in the light of a coming judge who is much greater than ourselves – indeed, one whose judgement may set all our disputes into quite a different frame and perspective: *‘...we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.’* He said, *‘For it is written “As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God”. So then each one of us will be accountable to God.’* (Romans 14.10b-12).

In the end, paradoxically, this is a huge part of Christian hope – the hope of judgement. God’s judgement will make all things plain where now they are confused, and will also (even while it shows up our sins,) seek out our desire to love and to please him, giving it value, however misguided we might have been in particular points.

It sometimes seems that the Anglican Communion has gone past the point where we can continue to

welcome each other, not acting on our own convictions for the sake of the other side in controversy; too much water may have flowed under the bridge to save any sense of unity between America and Nigeria, for example. But I hope that in our own congregation – and in many other congregations like it, where there are people who hold different and opposed convictions about controversial issues, we can continue to respond to St Paul's appeal, and '*welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God*'. I fervently pray that pressures from outside may never influence us to tear ourselves apart from each other by asking us to take some kind of a 'stand' as a parish, one way or another.

And I also fervently pray – as I hope you do, too – for our Anglican Communion in all its parts, and for Archbishop Rowan at the centre of it. He is someone, in my estimation, who has taken St Paul's teaching very deeply to heart, and suffers for it.