

**SERMON AT GELORUP 17/9/2017: GEOFF CHADWICK**

**THE SUNDAY BETWEEN 11-17 SEPTEMBER (OS 24): ROMANS 14:1-14**

**QUARRELLING**

If you think the early church was all sweetness and light, you need to think again. In the Romans reading today we get hints of some early church's differences of opinion. This morning we heard two of them: one about food and the other about festival days.

These days we may see these things as trivial but as with most quarrels the presenting issue is not the real issue. There's always something deeper at stake.

**Food:**

In terms of food, the deeper issue is that of purity. For the Christians with Jewish leanings, one worshiped God by keeping oneself pure. To honour God was to be clean: and if you found yourself "dirty" there were certain procedures you could undertake to be made clean again. *Cleanliness is next to Godliness* could easily be their motto. So certain foods either made you clean or unclean before God: hence the quarrelling. But as Paul points out, in a not so subtle way, that it is the quarrelling that is making you impure. He is warning them by saying: *"Don't let the 'food fight' become a 'stumbling block' amongst you."* (Incidentally, a stumbling block is a rock people put in front of blind people as a joke so they would fall over in public and be a source of laughter.)

**Festivals:**

Festival days also became a problem. The Jewish Christians insisted that the old festivals such as Yom-Kapoor, the Sabbath, and Pentecost should be kept. The Gentile Christians saw no need for this and proclaimed that *"all days were the same."* Nevertheless, it is not as simple as this as many Gentile Christians attended the Jewish Festivals. The cynic in me suspects they did this because the Jewish Festivals were more fun! But in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century the theologian and Archbishop, John Chrysostom endeavoured to put an end to this practice. In words that we might not find acceptable today he said:

*The festivals of the pitiful and miserable Jews are soon to march upon us one after the other and in quick succession: the feast of Trumpets, the feast of Tabernacles, the fasts. There are many in our ranks who say they think as we do. Yet some of these are going to watch the festivals and others will join the Jews in keeping their feasts and observing their fasts. I wish to drive this perverse custom from the Church right now.*

(John Chryostom, c407: *Holily: Adventus Judaeos*,  
<http://www.historymuse.net/readings/ChrysostomJudaizingChristians.htm> accessed 17/9/2017)

These are tough words in language we would find troubling today...

Curiously, the Puritans of the 15-1600s also attempted to abolish church festival days. Saints' Days were abandoned and Christmas Day got the chop although Easter and the Lord's Day remained. I say, "*The Lord's Day*" quite deliberately because the Puritans banned the title **Sun**-day as it implied Pagan worship of the Sun god.

In the end, the English church chose to keep many of festival days although quite a few of the Catholic saint days were demoted to "lesser feast days." I have a quote here from the *Of Ceremonies* section of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer which spells out what happened. It's in Elizabethan English but still worth a read:

***OF** such Ceremonies as be used in the Church, and have had their beginning by the institution of man, some at the first were of godly intent and purpose devised, and yet at length turned to vanity and superstition: some entered into the Church by indiscreet devotion, and such a zeal as was without knowledge; and for because they were winked at in the beginning, they grew daily to more and more abuses, which not only for their unprofitableness, but also because they have much blinded the people, and obscured the glory of God, are worthy to be cut away, and clean rejected: other there be, which although they have been devised by man, yet it is thought good to reserve them still, as well for a decent order in the Church, (for the which they were first devised) as because they pertain to edification, whereunto all things done in the Church (as the Apostle teacheth) ought to be referred...*

*Some[ceremonies] are put away, because the great excess and multitude of them hath so increased in these latter days, that the burden of them was intolerable; whereof Saint Augustine in his time complained, that they were grown to such a number, that the estate of Christian people was in worse case concerning that matter, than were the Jews.*

*And he counselled that such yoke and burden should be taken away, as time would serve quietly to do it...*

*And besides this, Christ's Gospel is not a Ceremonial Law, (as much of Moses' Law was,) but it is a Religion to serve God, not in bondage of the figure or shadow, but in the freedom of the Spirit:*

You can see how the Elizabethan church was struggling with ceremonies – which ones to keep and which ones to throw away. Curiously, we still have problems like that today.

I know that it is still possible to have a fight over whether it is acceptable or not to put red flowers on the altar during Lent. Don't laugh! I've been there. We need to be careful!

We must be careful because our petty quarrels about ceremony and purity, can become stumbling blocks to ourselves and to those who see what we do. We must be honest and look below the surface of any petty quarrel we might have. We must look deeper to discover what the quarrel really is about.

In my role as a counsellor and pastor over many years I've come to discover that quarrels are generally about one of three things.

1) Threats to Precious Beliefs:

Someone has a belief that they think is very precious and they want to hold on to it and its being threatened.

2) The Loss of Power:

Losing control, or someone wanting to take control over someone else.

3) Saving Face:

When you have made a mistake and you want to cover it up.

Examples:

- 1) Precious beliefs: There's a little debate going on in our community about homosexuality. We need to be careful because that debate could turn into a debate about precious beliefs.

Many of us may hold beliefs that are precious but are being challenged. We then need to ask ourselves are those beliefs as precious as we really think they are. Do I only believe them because Miss Jones, (whom I love because she taught me when I was 6) instilled them in me but actually they aren't quite true.

- 2) Power: Loss of power is never far away in quarrels – especially in families. I've lost count of the times I've counselled conflicted families over control. So often someone wants to have control over other family members and thinks it's for their own good. How strange it seems to them that they meet resistance back. *"After all I know what's best for them."* they say. So if you're in a quarrel with your family at the moment take a good and honest look at what's happening and where there may be power plays. Maybe someone's trying to control you or, on the other hand, you may be trying to control them!
  
- 3) Saving face: Have you ever made a mistake and tried to cover it up? As the saying goes: *To err is human* so how about we just be human and admit when we've made a mistake?

Let's take an opportunity now to contemplate where we might be in one of these situations:

- 1) A precious belief of mine is being challenged.
- 2) I'm in a power-struggle
- 3) I've tried to hide a mistake and it might just be better to admit it.

...

Let us pray some words of confession:

Lord God,

We come knowing that we do not always get it right.

There are times when we know we should change our view but we just want to hold on to what we think is precious.

We know there are times when we want to control other people against their will and we often fear that that's what others want to do to us.

Lord God, as human beings we often make mistakes, help us to be opened by our mistakes and if we need to ask someone for forgiveness let us have the courage to do so and also, let us have the courage to offer it.

And as we continue in our worship today, may our ceremony be one that honours you.

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**