

Sermon for 30th August 2026, Year A, Pentecost 14, Proper 17

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Romans 12:9-end

Sermon

Throughout the centuries, church congregations have always been faced with the challenge of trying to understand what it means to be a distinctly Christian community. How is our way of life different or similar to the ways of the wider society around us?

The Romans that the Apostle Paul wrote his long letter to, were a mixture of both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians living together in Rome, that Paul hoped to visit in due course. In his first eleven chapters he spent most of his time trying to explain that Jewish and non-Jewish Christians were the same in God's eyes, and that neither should assume superiority over the other. Two very different cultural groups had come together into a single Christian community and understandably, there were tensions that needed to be addressed.

But then after spending eleven chapters doing just that, Paul comes to his great 'Therefore' in chapter twelve. 'Therefore, since God loves you all equally as different branches of this same family', "let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour". Here are the implications of God's love and grace for the way in which we should live our lives, as individuals, families, and communities.

For the community to which Paul was writing, the tension between God's way of life and their surrounding society couldn't have been more stark. They were living in Rome, the heart of an empire, and part of a Roman society which was based on privilege, power, and social conformity. In the middle of all that, the

new churches were trying to live according to the radical teachings of Jesus: love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you; sell your possessions and give to the poor; the rich will not inherit the kingdom of God, and so on.

How tempting it must have been to conform to the ways of the dominant society around them, to bow down to the wealthy and powerful for the sake of an easier life and privileges in society. As we see in our modern day, the more a government dominates their population with brutality, corruption, and cruelty, the more that human rights are ignored or undermined, the more difficult it becomes to live with virtue and empathy for others, because that makes you a target.

No one wants to be the centre of attention in a society that will throw you in jail, or even throw you to the lions, if you're in any way different. And so, the temptation is always to play along, to stay silent. Anything for an easy life – or in some case to literally save your life.

Of course, many of those early Christians did not play along, including Paul himself. Many were arrested and tortured and put to death because they insisted on worshiping Jesus rather than the Roman Emperor, and they started treating everyone equally when their wider society was all about respecting hierarchy and social status.

These days, you might think the modern world has become a different place. Our own society, our legal system, the welfare state, and especially the NHS, are all rooted quite firmly in Christian values. Christians literally invented hospitals. Christian ideas have become so rooted in our laws that our sister Church, The Church of England, has bishops amending laws in the House of Lords, while King Charles is their Supreme Governor.

But the problem here is that we Christians can become so comfortably privileged in society that we lose our sense of identity as an alternative community of

compassion, forgiveness, inclusion and love. It's more subtle today than two thousand years ago, but still we face the temptation to take much more delight in wealth, status, self-importance and conformity, than in following the path of humility and self-sacrifice that Jesus and Paul taught us.

If an important person with a grand title were to come into our church for a Sunday service, might we be tempted to show them far more attention and deference than someone of much more humble station? But Jesus would surely be hanging out with the people who are really struggling.

Society around us is still mostly about getting not giving, status not humility, grudges not forgiveness. But Jesus calls us to a way of life that embodies genuine love, mutual respect, humility, solidarity, and harmony. It is a way of life that cares most deeply for those we consider strangers, outsiders, and foreigners, prioritising their wellbeing as equal to our own. These are the people Jesus called our neighbours.

The Christian tradition calls this 'hospitality'. Hospitality is a distinctive mark of the Church. Christianity was born out of undeserved and unexpected hospitality, and it spread because of that hospitality. People who didn't think they were worthy of belonging found that Jesus had placed them at the very heart of his new community. Radical hospitality is the practice by which the Church stands or falls.

And hospitality does not just mean welcoming newcomers into a congregation or even doing good charitable work in the community. While these are good things, they still come with a sense that this is our place, our group, and everyone who comes here must conform to the way we like to do things. True hospitality means giving outsiders a seat at the table, making it as much theirs as ours, where everyone has an equal say in how things are to be done.

This is hard to do. We essentially need to give up our own power, our sense of ownership, to truly make others welcome.

But this humility, this genuine love, is what causes churches to grow in number and deepen in virtue. Growing churches often report that those who join them do so because they had discovered in that community a spirit of love and hospitality that attracted them, not just by the way they treated visitors, but how they treated each other.

Church is the place where we can all practice the Way of Love that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans. Here in this place, we learn how to rejoice in hope and become patient in suffering. Here we are taught to persevere in prayer, to let God's love for us transform us, to contribute to the needs of everyone around us, to forgive those who have offended us, and to allow people who seem like outsiders to become leaders and not just temporary guests who must follow our ways.

There is a message in Paul's letter for everyone. Some of us may feel one phrase or sentence speaks more to us than another, and this is of course, entirely normal. So, ponder again the words of this reading on the pewsheet, and allow them to work their way into your heart.

As for me, the preacher, I must reflect most deeply on the end of verse 16. "Do not claim to be wiser than you are". Oops. I hope it's not too late!