

Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
And my heart's stirring before You,
LORD, my rock and redeemer.

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Robert Alter, 2019.)

When was the last time you were at a church gathering and there was disagreement about who ate what and when? It doesn't happen, right? Well I can remember a time when I was ministering in a congregation that neighboured a Tongan Uniting Church. There were highs and lows associated with being geographically close to another Uniting Church. For instance, whenever we got together for shared celebrations I was placed at the "*top table*" with the Tongan ministers. I felt somewhat uncomfortable about that. Don't get me wrong it was an attractive affair, the aromatic smells of meats and vegies, the colourful array of a wide variety of fruits and decorations. There was always a great feast set out and we, the ministers, were always served first and at our seats, while all the other guests waited patiently. Eventually everyone else there had to self-serve at the feast table.

Those feasts were a very different experience to the more mutual, serve yourself coffee and cake while catching up with people, that often happens in Uniting Church gatherings. One of the learnings I got, from those and other equally diverse experiences of church, was that it can be easier for me to accept quite divergent practices when I'm visiting churches than I normally would do at my home church.

The apostle Paul seemingly had quite a few experiences with a diversity of sharing food practices in his day too. Early in his ministry (Gal 2), Paul, alongside Barnabas and Peter, determined that, in a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, food shared in community, should not be prepared according to strict Jewish rules (kosher). That seemed to be the accepted practice in the church in Galatia up until James, the brother of Jesus, set a different standard; that all food shared in '*Christ following communities*' must be kosher.

Maybe Paul was concerned about the implications of James' new standard on his own leadership role. No matter what the underlying circumstances may have been, Paul, took a strong stand in Galatia against Peter and Barnabas when they adhered to James' kosher rule. Then Paul was adamant that food shared in Christian community should not be kosher. At that time, Paul's strict adherence, to his own food sharing policy, resulted in his separation from ministry with his colleagues, Peter and Barnabas. Years later, in very different circumstances, Paul acknowledged, and seemed to freely accept, differences in the eating practices of the 'weak in faith' (Rom 14:1) and the '*strong*' who '*ought to put up with the failings of the weak*' (Rom 15:1). Something had changed; Paul no longer stood his ground on the particular practices of eating among Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul became much more concerned with giving priority to fostering principled communal relationships.

If we take into account that Paul was addressing two very different communities, the Galatians and the Romans, and, that he may have suffered in some ways due to the rift between himself and his colleagues, we might surmise that Paul's theology had matured towards a focus on principles rather than practices. In Paul's letter to the Romans the principle of 'not judging' seemed to trump the practice of '*what and how eating occurs*'. I wonder whether this is a fair assessment though. In Galatia, Paul may have also been working from a principle of '*inclusion for all*' (Gal 3:28-29). Interestingly though, in Galatia, inclusion could have been maintained by either everyone eating kosher or no-one eating kosher. Maybe Paul's own sense of self got in the way of his already established Godly principles.

Who knows really? I don't. What I do know is that when I first became associated with the Uniting Church, in the 1990's, I reflected on the principle of '*unity in faith and mission*' as it is expressed in the second paragraph of the Basis of Union. I recall learning that the idea of '*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*' (Eph 4:4-6) was a significant aspect of early Christianity. Since then my experience, of being associated with numerous expressions of the '*uniting church*', has been that many of us have, mostly, managed to hold ourselves accountable to the principles of both '*diversity*' and '*unity*'. This can be appreciated both ecumenically, across Christian traditions, and within the wider diversity of Uniting Church. Church in Australia in the 21st Century has embraced many diverse cultural expressions. I have no doubt that there are differences even between the Rosedale, Glengarry and Traralgon gatherings too.

Now my experience may be skewed, but I have never been in any church where every member has ALWAYS adhered to both principles, of '*diversity*' and '*unity*'. Like Paul, when different practices are out there, in other churches, I find it easier to be gracious and accepting. And like Paul, when my own familiar practices are challenged, or when there is disagreement or even misunderstanding about them, I can become protective or confused and even find myself separating from those I most need to work things out with. Now, unlike Paul, I don't go as far as calling myself either '*strong*' or '*weak*' in faith. But I am likely to claim that I am a fragile, faulty human being, just like others.

Regardless, accepting we are fragile and faulty does not let us get away with misconduct. One thing I am quite sure of is that neither Jesus nor Paul taught that Godly living (Com-Unity) was an easy process of 'live and let live'. I agree, even when I don't live up to it, that following Christ, demands much from each of us. Discipleship is costly. It is costly to lay down our sense of being a fully separate self (individuals) and choosing instead, to building up others, so we may be One Body.

In our Epistle reading for today, Paul reminds me that in every and any disagreement or debate I find myself in, the '*strong*' may despise the '*weak*', while the '*weak*' may judge the '*strong*'. When this '*separating*' practice goes unaddressed, a cycle of harm rolls around and around and around, like a wheel, but going nowhere.

More importantly though, Paul reminds me, that in Christ, Godly *Com-Unity* is possible. Friends, we can do all things, even differently one from another, in honour of Christ: We can '*eat in honour of the Lord*' and we can '*abstain in honour of the Lord*' (Rom 14:6). Difference in itself is not a problem to be solved, it is an opportunity for us to more fully understand and honour the great diversity of God's good creation and our place in it.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement
Grant you to live in harmony with One another,
in accordance with Christ Jesus,
so that together you may,
with one voice, glorify the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Romans 15:5-6)

