

Sunday 13th September - 15th Sunday after Trinity (Year A)

I wonder how many of you have played the card game 'Happy Families'; I did years ago. But what makes a happy family (if that is at all possible)? No family is perfect because it often comprises of people with different personalities. Just because a child comes from the same nest doesn't mean that they will be like their siblings. We are all different – more than that unique. The challenge is how can we live together in harmony whilst addressing the frictions and conflicts as and when they arise (for they will!).

The Church is a community of believers – a family comprising of individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds, each with their own personality. We have been brought to together because of our love of God and because we want to follow Jesus – The Way, the Truth and the Life. When thrown together, it is inevitable that conflicts and tensions will occur. However, it is how we deal with them when they arise that really matters. Both of today's set lectionary readings do just that.

The Letter to the Romans was written in the first century, probably around the mid-50s AD, to a Christian community Paul had not founded. The church included people from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Their different religious histories shaped how they understood Christian life.

It should be read and understood in the light of a significant event that took place around AD49 - the expulsion of Jews from Rome under Emperor Claudius. When these Jewish residents returned after his death, they entered a community whose practices and leadership had developed during their absence. This likely contributed to tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. What foods they could or couldn't eat became an issue of fierce debate.

St Paul exhorts them to welcome them and not despise those who are weak in faith. The central problem was not simply that the believers disagreed. The issue was judgement. They judged and despised one another because of their disagreement. Paul argued that whilst both groups belonged to the Lord and gave thanks to God, each would ultimately answer to God rather than to each other.

Today's Gospel from Matthew's Gospel was written for a community of Jesus' followers who were navigating conflict, vulnerability, and the challenge of forming a distinct identity. Chapter 18 is often called the "*community discourse*" because it gathers Jesus' teaching about relationships among his disciples. It follows on from the preceding passage, Matthew 18:15–20, which gives a process for dealing with a fellow believer who sins.

Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a fellow Christian, 7 or 77 times. Jesus makes it clear that is not about treating forgiveness as something that can be counted. Because God has shown us immeasurable mercy, we ought to extend that mercy to one another. Forgiveness is not an optional private virtue but rather a defining practice of the Christian family of which we today are part.

Fr Andy