**Romans 15:1-13**

**Hospitality – the heart of the Gospel**

If there’s a constant theme that runs through our community life at St. Andrew’s, it is loving others and caring for them. It’s something I preach on so often and it is the hallmark, I hope, of all the activities in which we are engaged. We want to increasingly become a community hallmarked by love; hallmarked by kindness, and compassion, and hospitality.

 Loving others and caring for them should underpin everything we are and all we do. And that, of course, is the very heartbeat of the Christian gospel.

 And in the first reading we had this morning, from Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul draws us back to this in verse 1. He begins by saying, “We, the strong, ought to support the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves”.

 It’s interesting that Paul speaks of us as ‘the strong’, isn’t it? What he actually writes in the Greek is ‘the powerful people’. And, of course, implicit in that is the idea that those of us who have power are able to dominate the weak.

 And that is very often true in churches, isn’t it? There are those who hold positions of power, either formally or informally, whether through the wearing of a dog-collar or the carrying of a title like Warden or a member of the PCC and so on, and through our position of authority, we are able to exert some sort of power and to dominate those who have no official power in the body of Christ. And the same can happen with informal power too. There are those who may have been coming to the church for 10, 20, 30 years or more who are considered elders of the church through longevity of service and others may bow down to their wisdom and experience and it is easy, through informal power, to dominate the weak or the newer members. And, as Paul says here, the temptation through power and domination, is to ‘please ourselves’. There is a temptation to create the church that suits us, use the liturgies that suit us, have the social events we want, set up the groups and sub-committees we want to be a part of. In all things, there is a temptation for the powerful people to dominate the weak and to build the church that suits them and keeps them comfortable.

 But Paul opposes this way of thinking, this way of behaving, and he says that, actually, the opposite mind should be amongst us; that the powerful people have a moral obligation to support the weaker and not to create a church that pleases themselves but work towards the creation of a church that is of benefit to the many, not the few.

 And the word Paul uses for ‘support’ has a wide range of meanings. But the idea behind it, again, is not one of tolerating weakness but carrying someone forward, supporting them with all our strength. That is type of community the church must be: where the powerful people use their power for the best ends of those who are weaker, where the people with power, formal or informal, try to create a church that will encourage and help newer members at St. Andrew’s and not do that through gritted teeth but through a real desire to see the community grow in strength. As Paul goes on to say in verse 2, “Let each of us please his neighbour with a view to what is good, for upbuilding.”

 The concern of us all, especially those of us who in whatever way have power, should be for the building up of the community over and above the desire to please ourselves.

 How do we do that?

 We do that, of course, by encouraging each individual believer, especially the weak, but always in the context of the community, always in the context of them being a part of the body of Christ, which is St. Andrew’s.

 And our motivation must always be the example of Christ to us as Paul goes on in verse 3 to make explicit: “For the Christ too did not please himself”.

 Many translations just have the word ‘Christ’ - but Paul is very definite here by saying ‘the Christ’. Of course he is referring to the person Jesus Christ. But by calling him ‘the Christ’ he is drawing our attention to his role, his ministry, and the fact that ‘the Christ’ came to us in order to lead a submissive, obedient life - even to death on the cross. We don’t just look at the life of Jesus Christ and see that he was obedient: here Paul is drawing our attention to the divine plan, if you like; the sending of the Christ to a ministry of submission and humility. And just as the Christ undertook that ministry for us, so we are to undertake that ministry for one another.

 And so he concludes this section with two verses that are phrased very interestingly: “May the God of patience and of comfort give you to live in harmony among yourselves in accordance with Christ Jesus in order that with one mind and with one voice you might glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I think this is a particularly beautiful verse for one key reason…

 Remember the context into which Paul is writing. The church in Rome was extremely multi-cultural, so Paul is addressing a situation of diversity; the Christians in Rome – and we here at St. Andrew’s, Enfield – hold a vast array of opinions about ethics and styles of worship, and doctrines and so on. The context is one of huge diversity and Paul has not suggested that unity is found in all believing the same things about everything. Instead, he is suggesting that unity comes through worship. This Roman church, so diverse in its belief and practices, live in harmony among themselves as they glorify God in worship with one mind and one voice.

 And so it is true of us too. We hold diverse views and have diverse practices but we live and thrive together in harmony as Christian brothers and sisters as we glorify God in worship with one mind and voice.

 So moving into verse 7, Paul begins to draw his letter to a close and the previous 15 chapters are summed up in one short sentence. Indeed, the whole Christian gospel is summed up in one short sentence: “Therefore welcome one another, as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.” Mutual acceptance and a welcome *from* all *to* all, mirroring Christ is the heart of the Christian gospel: the absolute outworking of the greatest commandments to love God and to love our neighbour.

 If a church is not welcoming, it is not a church at all…

 And you can imagine now the impact of Paul’s words as they are read out in that first congregation comprising Greeks and Gentiles and new converts and established believers and Jews from Rome and Jews returning after their expulsion from the city; some who believed in circumcision and the priority of the Jewish faith and the keeping of holy days and others who believed all were equal in the sight of God and so on…In the midst of this diversity, Paul simply says, “Welcome one another, as Christ also welcomed you”

 That is what church is all about. It’s as simple and straightforward as that…

 And the key word here is ‘as’: “as Christ welcomed you”. Paul could have used different words here, but he chooses ‘as’. He could have said, “Welcome one another because Christ also welcomed you” but he says, “Welcome one another as Christ also welcomed you…”

 And that’s important because Paul is telling us something about what it actually involves for us to show welcome to others; the cost of welcome, if you like. In Philippians 2, Paul writes this: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

 That degree of self-emptying, self-denial, self-sacrifice, is absolutely at the heart of how we welcome others. If we are to follow Christ and allow the church to be the body of Christ, we simply must lay aside our own desires and our own ambitions and our own preferences in pursuit of welcoming others into the fellowship.

 As Paul reminds us in Philippians, Jesus laid aside all his privileges in order to become a servant to all. For those of us established in our church, we too must lay aside all our privileges and become the servants of all so that they can be welcomed in. It’s a tough calling, to be sure, but it is our calling all the same: “Welcome one another, as Christ also welcomed you…”

 And to emphasise this truth, especially to the Jewish hearers who may have been struggling with the idea of welcoming Gentile believers, Paul once again draws on their spiritual heritage in verse 8: “Christ has become servant of the circumcised for the sake of God’s truth to confirm the promises of the fathers.”

 In one sense, the Christian faith is so incredibly simple: it’s all about the welcome…The whole of the Old Testament story is about the welcome of God for his people Israel. The whole ministry of Jesus was about the welcome of God to sinners and outcasts. The whole ministry of the church is all about welcome, welcome, welcome.

 As we welcome others, we model God to the world. It is as simple as that.

 For this early church, the result was plainly obvious, verse 9: “and the Gentiles to give glory to God for his mercy”. Christ became the servant of all for the salvation of the world; so that the Jews could have the promises confirmed to them and so that the Gentiles could come into God’s plan of salvation and glorify him in their lives.

 If we truly offer a welcome to others, that broad scope of salvation becomes a reality in our local community.

 And to finally drive home his point, Paul chooses four verses from the Jewish scriptures to prove that the outsider has always been welcomed in to God’s plan of salvation; that the Gentile has always been on the heart of God for salvation and not just the chosen race, the Jews. First, from Psalm 18: “I will confess you among the Gentiles and sing praise to your name”. Next, Deuteronomy 32:43: “rejoice, Gentiles, with his people”. Next, Psalm 117: “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles”. And finally, Isaiah 11:10: “The root of Jesse shall come…in him the Gentiles shall hope”.

 Here is the culmination of all Paul’s teaching in Romans. Those who have had the privilege of knowing God’s salvation as part of their spiritual heritage are to welcome in those who are new to the faith. Those who are in every way religious are to put their religiosity to one side so that the outcast can find God for themselves. Those who are powerful in the sacred institutions of God are to support the weak by laying aside their own ambitions in order to welcome in those who are weak.

 The whole of Paul’s teaching has been building up to this moment: here is the point of the letter to the Romans, here is the point of the Christian faith. Welcome them in.

 And as we do so, we shall come to experience God in a new and precious way that will transform who we are and what we are.

 It’s all about the welcome.

 And our prayer is that, week by week, we become a more welcoming church where we can celebrate diversity and accept one another as brothers and sisters to the glory of God the Father.