

Scruples

Romans 14

The New Testament lesson today has one of Paul's splendidly practical essays in Christian living. After all the high-flown theology of the earlier part of Romans, this must have come as a relief to his readers. And yet it flows naturally from it - Christian behaviour has to follow from Christian theology - and in most of Paul's letters, that is the pattern - you can summarise the shape as being: 1) This is the truth about God, therefore: 2) this is the way you should act. In this particular case, the pattern is doubly appropriate, because having expounded the love of God, he goes on to talk about the attitudes we should have to those whose current understanding of God is defective.

So Paul talks about those weaker brethren who have scruples. Note he is quite happy to define them as weaker, because he believes that to be the truth. He goes on to ask for tolerance for them - but not on the basis of their opinion being equally correct. They are weaker, he says, because of two factors. First of all, they are still legalists at heart. In theory they know that Jesus has superseded the law of Moses - that they are no longer bound by its precepts in the way that they were. And yet, they actually prefer to have lots of rules, and since those are not being provided by the Christian community, they impose them on themselves. They have not yet made Christian freedom a reality. Secondly, they are still hooked on to the idea that you can justify yourself in God's eyes by what you do. They believe they can earn God's love, if they are upright enough. The way this manifests itself in the Roman community to which Paul was writing was threefold. We don't know if this was one group of people with these three traits, or three different groups. But it seems that there were those who were scrupulous about the food they ate for religious reasons. Maybe they were former Jews who couldn't break loose from the dietary laws that they had been brought up with. You can understand that feeling. If all your life you are told that eating pork is wrong, a sin, a betrayal of religious faith, then you can see how your palate is likely to react, even if your mind says that it is alright. Or of course they may have been vegetarians for some other reason. The second group were those who had scruples about days - probably a reference to Sabbath-keeping. Again, it is easy to see how people whose lives had been governed by such things found it very hard to break loose. The third group were those who did not drink wine - possibly former adherents of one of the Jewish sects which were abstemious. Here are three groups, all doing - or rather *not* doing various things for the sake of their religion. But Paul says they are weaker, because they have not grasped the truth that Christ has set us free from rules. But having said that, the attitude he wants everyone to take is that of loving, accepting, and encouraging them. It is all too easy for both sides to become critical and judgemental, and that is what Paul is trying to avoid. Later generations of moral theologians began to distinguish between the primary ethics of Christian living, and those lesser things which are up to each person's conscience - *adiaphora*, as they came to call them - peripheral, secondary matters. What Paul is

anxious about is that brother Christians, all in their own way trying to be Christ' people, should not be divided over the route they take in their pilgrimage. They are all heading in the same direction: don't squabble over the precise route. But, addressing these people with scruples, he warns them that they ought to hold their opinions for the right reasons - that is to say, not out of convention, or superstition, but out of real conviction. Now discerning our own motives for the way we behave is notoriously difficult. There are many things we do out of sheer conformity. They may be right or wrong - but the reason we do them is because everyone else does - or at least most people do! We conform to the norm - we fit in. And if that is the reason, and that alone, then we ought to think again. The second possibility is that we do something, or don't do something, out of superstition - it might be bad for us, it might offend the spirits, or whatever. Superstition can't be condoned, says Paul - that isn't a reason. It offends theology too much to act out of superstition. Let me give an example. In England we kneel to receive Communion, for the most part. So I have met from time to time people who have stopped coming to Communion because their arthritis prevents their kneeling. What is in their way is *convention*. They have acted out of a binding sense of conformity. Equally, there are people who are superstitious about exactly the same thing - that was such an issue at the time of Cranmer that they had to insert a special explanatory rubric in the Prayer Book to explain that kneeling didn't imply anything superstitious. No, says Paul, the only reason you should have scruples is out of a deeply held conviction. And the rather difficult Greek of the first verse of this chapter may imply that others shouldn't go out of their way to argue people out of their convictions. Let them be, appears to be Paul's line. We are answerable to God - and although it may be a matter of indifference to person A whether or not he eats pork, it may be against the ill-informed conscience of person B. But Paul says that A is responsible to God for his decision to eat, and person B is equally responsible to God for his decision *not* to. They are not answerable to each other, in either case, but to God alone.

The risk is always that we treat people with less respect and honour than they are due, simply because of these matters. We may at best be merely irritated by them - oddities who make problems where none exist. But that can slip into some form of ridicule. And there is really very little more rude than laughing at someone's deeply-held convictions, however ludicrous they may seem to us. We are never going to be able to say we love someone we laugh at and ridicule. Love is the governing Christian virtue. And worst of all, it may be contempt - despising someone again cannot go with loving them. And we will never earn the right to tell people what we think if we are not prepared to listen seriously to their point of view.

So throughout the principle is to be that of loving, respecting, and not undermining the faith they have. They may be displaying odd attitudes, which we want them to grow out of. But if we tackle that the wrong way, we will harm them, rather than helping them. We are to educate them, not coerce them - and at all times we are to respect them. And sometimes that may be very difficult to do. I remember some correspondence in the Church Times about whether a Ugandan Bishop had been encouraging, or permitting polygamy. From what I read, it sounds as if he had been taking Paul's advice that we have been hearing: he had no doubts that polygamy is not the most appropriate lifestyle for a Christian - but again, it cannot be something which is so

absolute a bar to faith - the evidence of his experience is otherwise. He is trying to avoid laying down rules, but hopefully is moving towards people agreeing with him eventually. In the meantime he avoids ridicule and contempt - and in doing so has brought exactly those things on himself. We all have to watch it.

You can all think of innumerable examples which are much closer at hand. We don't have many people who fall into the categories that Paul was writing about - but the principles remain the same. We are not to ridicule or despise, but to respect and to listen to those who think differently from us, not out of convention or superstition, but out of real conviction.