

By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship (from [www.urc.org.uk](http://www.urc.org.uk))

Let us worship God. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God, your loving kindness is better than life itself; our lips shall give you praise. We will bless you as long as we live and lift up our hands in your name.

Hymn 611 (Tune: *Campbell* by John L. Bell)

1. Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

2. We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

3. I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the nighttime of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

4. I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow,  
till we've seen this journey through.

5. When we sing to God in heaven,  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

6. Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

Prayer of Approach (from [www.ipswichroadurc.org.uk](http://www.ipswichroadurc.org.uk))

Loving and faithful God, we come into your presence rejoicing. We come to sing your praise, we come to hear your words of power, we come to share your all-embracing love. Be present with us in this time together as we come to worship you.

Amen

Prayer of Confession

Father forgive us for the narrowness of our faith, and the limits we place on our worship and service. Forgive us for trying to keep our faith in Christ as if it were a private possession. Forgive us that we listen with joy to your Word of love yet sometimes find ourselves judging our sisters and brothers. Please fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we may have the courage and love to fully accept and love all of our fellow Christians.

We thank You that You accept all of us with our weaknesses and faults, and for your willingness to hear our confession again and again.

To all who turn to Christ, he says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your Kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.  
Now and for ever. Amen

## Reading: Romans 14:1-12

### The Danger of Criticism

14 Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. <sup>2</sup> For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval.

<sup>5</sup> In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. <sup>6</sup> Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honour him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honour the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. <sup>8</sup> If we live, it's to honour the Lord. And if we die, it's to honour the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

<sup>10</sup> So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> For the Scriptures say,

“As surely as I live,” says the Lord,  
“every knee will bend to me,  
and every tongue will declare allegiance to God.”

<sup>12</sup> Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.

### Reflection

I have my personal “rules” about what I will and will not eat. For example, it matters to me that my meat is free range, that my fruit and vegetables, as far as possible, are British, preferably from the South West. I recently read a book explaining the possible effects on health of ultra-processed foods and I am now trying to remove these from my diet (although I am a little too fond of a certain kind of chocolate biscuit!). However, if you ever catch me trying to lecture anyone else about what they should or shouldn't eat, stop me right there! Your food choices are not my business.

During the early years of Christianity, the Christians in Rome were a mixed community of former Jews and Gentiles - non-Jews who had previously followed pagan religions, including the practice of animal sacrifice to idols. A recently converted Gentile would have come to see such sacrificial rituals as abhorrent and many scholars believe that Paul was referring to such Christians when he described those who would only eat vegetables. Meat which had been sacrificed to a pagan idol would be perceived as contaminated. Jewish converts, on the other hand, would see these idols as meaningless, therefore any meat from these animals would be unaffected by the ritual sacrifice and acceptable to eat.

Paul uses the word “weak” of these more sensitive Gentile Christians, but his meaning is more in the sense of “immature” – their new faith has not yet escaped the influence of their former practices, which they want to abandon entirely, having nothing to do with any object connected to pagan worship.

In verse 5, Paul goes on to mention certain holy days: some (Jewish) Christians may have felt that it was still important to observe certain restrictions on the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days, while the Gentile Christians may not have such practices engrained in them from their culture.

We may think that we do not encounter such divisions today. However, do you remember July 1994? This was when the Sunday Trading Act came into force, allowing shops to open for up to six hours on a Sunday. I remember feeling sad that the quietness of Sundays would be gone forever, and some Christians felt, and still feel, that we just shouldn't shop on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Day. This feeling is still particularly strong in some areas of the UK. My husband and I visited the Isle of Harris a few years ago and found that even children's playgrounds were locked up on the Sabbath.

Christians are also deeply divided by denomination. Some of the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, URC members, Brethren, Pentecostals and others vary significantly, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, where, for example, Mary is venerated and saints play an important role in prayer and worship.

Some Christians believe in the literal truth of the creation story, others see it as a metaphor expressing an essential truth. Some believe that the communion wine and bread actually become the literal blood and body of Christ, while

others see them as symbols. There are Christians who are comfortable with the idea of same sex marriage and others who are not, often side by side in the same church.

Politics, too, is a great divider. Do we vote Labour, Conservative, Lib Dem, Green or otherwise? Were we for or against Brexit? Do we sometimes find it difficult to accept and understand those in our church whose strongly held political beliefs are not the same as ours?

What are we to make of such deep divisions? Can Paul's advice to these early Christians help us with how to view our differences? Notice that Paul does not take sides here. In verse 4 he challenges:

*"Who are you to condemn someone else's servants?"*

Verse 8 goes on:

*"For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. <sup>8</sup> If we live, it's to honour the Lord. And if we die, it's to honour the Lord."*

Each of us, *if sincerely trying to follow Jesus*, is acting according to an honest conscience, however twisted our actions and beliefs may appear to some of our fellow Christians.

We may all say to ourselves "I am right, and the others are misguided," but let us listen to Paul's counsel. While we may wish to debate or discuss matters about which we feel strongly, we must not *quarrel* about our differences. We should not fear difference, but accept and respect it, never avoiding contact with those of other denominations.

Equally, differences within our own denomination should be respected.

Let us consider some well known words of Jesus from Mark's Gospel, chapter 12:

<sup>28</sup> *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"*

<sup>29</sup> *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

Perhaps this was in Paul's mind when he asked why Christians would condemn or look down on another believer. Churches have developed doctrines, rituals and habits but if we create *rules* from these we are defying Jesus and what he stated are the essentials of God's law.

Like the Gentile Christians in Rome who were repulsed by the thought of eating food which had been sacrificed to idols, our brothers and sisters may be disturbed and upset by certain things. Suppose we are settled in our own minds that particular activities are acceptable on the Sabbath, or that the creation story is a metaphor. Would it be loving to force our interpretation onto our fellow Christians who have different views?

None of the above means that we can assume we are following a faith in which "anything goes" morally or doctrinally – we must never say "if I think something is okay, then it is." No. This passage is not an endorsement of individualism. What we may feel is our own business is never just about us, for whatever you and I do in our small lives sends ripples of consequences out into the world. The actions of our fellow Christians do the same. Like the ripples in a lake, made by raindrops, pebbles, water striders or swans, they flow into one another, creating what should be a beautiful, united scene. We need our combined Christian ripples to merge seamlessly with the great tidal wave of God's saving love in Jesus.

### Prayer of Intercession

Let us pray for our suffering world:

For those suffering and grieving as a result of natural disasters and climate change. We ask for your blessing on the brave aid workers who travel to disaster zones at great risk to themselves.

We pray for all affected by war, cruelty and greed and we ask that the perpetrators of such evils may experience a change in their hearts and find You in their lives.

We pray for Christians throughout the world, for unity, mutual understanding and forgiveness. And for our own Circuit, our own congregations. May we always let love and kindness dominate our relationships.

We pray for courage and relief from suffering for the sick among us, and for comfort for the bereaved.

Please give us all the strength to show love and compassion, as well as the humility to ask for help for ourselves.

Let us never lose sight of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, in whom all our hope is found.

We offer all our prayers to you in His name.

Amen

Hymn 615 (Tune: Londonderry Air)

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,  
without the need to manage and to own;  
a haven free from posing and pretending,  
where every weakness may be safely known.  
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,  
give me your love wherever we may go:  
as God loves us, so let us love each other,  
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,  
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;  
that helps us face the risk of truly living,  
and makes us brave to be what we might be.

Give me your strength when all my words are  
weakness,  
give me your love in spite of all you know:  
as God loves us, so let us love each other,  
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

Let love be real, with no manipulation,  
no secret wish to harness or control;  
let us accept each other's incompleteness,  
and share the joy of learning to be whole.  
Give me your hope through dreams and  
disappointments,  
give me your trust when all my failings show:  
as God loves us, so let us love each other,  
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow

Blessing

Let us end this service but continue our journey with Christ, refreshed and inspired by God's holy Word to love our sisters and brothers throughout the world.

May you be blessed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen