

'The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14:17).

I confess that I do eat muesli for breakfast. At the moment I can commend to fellow muesli eaters the Co-op own-brand mixture which I think is actually better than the more expensive branded Alpen muesli. This is good as it's easily available in the village at the Co-op. Now that I have confessed to my muesli predilection, I wonder how you now judge me? Perhaps you think he eats quiche, or hugs trees, or has embraced veganism or digs up college lawns as a member of Extinction Rebellion? Any of these could be true but it's interesting simply because I'm a muesli eater that in the minds of some it is associated with a passionate if slightly simplistic ideology.

Now we might imagine that St Paul, the passionate writer of *The Letter to the Romans*, would be siding with the muesli-quiche-vegan-eating, tree-hugging eco-warrior type as a metaphor of those driven by conviction and faith which is contrary current social trends. But it appears he doesn't; very surprisingly he calls them 'weak'. He singles out the vegetarians as those who are also the type of people who rigorously observe the sabbath laws (14:5), of fasting and asceticism (14:6).

So, in what way are these vegetarians 'weak'? The answer I think depends who is making this judgement. Is it really Paul or rather is it some of Paul's followers, those devotees of Paul who think that the weak Christian is the one who has not fully understood that living in Christ means being liberated from the Pharisaic food laws, sabbath laws, and set fast days. Maybe these Paulines think that weak Christians are still living too much according to what St Paul describes as the 'flesh' or the 'law'. If they were stronger, they should know that God's grace has liberated them from their Jewish roots and Jewish laws.

This is why the Paulines, those who *think* they are following the message of Romans, say – and here I am paraphrasing their words from verse 2, 'we have such strong faith that we can eat anything'.

It is said, you *are* what you eat.

Now for Paul's bombshell. The bombshell is that despite all his criticisms of living under the law, there are no weak and strong Christians. As he draws to the end of his letter, Paul does what we must all do from time to time, and that is to stand back and challenge oneself by applying critically the principles of faith which we confess.

That is Paul's challenge to himself and his readers and he concludes that in their various ways both weak and strong have their virtues.

There is considerable virtue, for instance, in the 'vegetarian' (muesli-eating) Christian – the one who applies the rigours of faith in a very disciplined and focused manner. Christianity

has long had a tradition of monasticism, the ascetic early desert fathers dedicated themselves to lives of solitary prayer, the Sabbatarians in the 19th campaigned for Sunday rest, and last week many Christians joined the Extinction Rebellion rallies in London – one of them holding a banner was our former archbishop, Rowan Williams.

And there is great virtue in the ‘omnivore’ liberal Christian who embraces new forms of worship; or engages with contemporary philosophy or delves into mysticism.

But in fact, a moment’s reflection shows that the apparent differences between weak and strong are not only superficial but meaningless. Yet, as we well know, the different Christian traditions have been and continue to be critical of each other.

Years’ ago an older theology ordinand, who had trained as a scientist, said to me that he made it a matter of principle to read theology books from traditions which were not his own and to attend church worship outside his comfort zone.

He was right. The freedom which Paul talks of in Romans does not come from sticking to only one kind of religious diet; the hope of transformation which he sets out in chapter 12, is very simply to allow oneself to be open to the will of God without judgement (12:1-2).

The significant point Paul is making in this chapter which he is applying to himself as much as to his followers, is that there is no special Pauline Christianity. There is no strong or right Pauline form of Christianity, just the spiritual freedom which comes from Christ.

So, I end with one more dietary analogy which Paul uses (14:3): the table. In Judaism welcoming the stranger to one’s table was and is the true sign of fellowship and humanity. It is not only good manners but morally incumbent for both host and guest to show respect to each other: to eat what one is offered and offer what would make one’s guest comfortable.

For all churches, but especially in places such as Linton where the village church has to serve many different religious tastes, Paul’s metaphor of varied religious diets at the table of hospitality is crucially important.

For, at the table, in the Kingdom of God both so-called strong and so-called weak Christians are all equally welcomed; neither group is simplistically to judge each other (14:3) and assume they know what they must believe, ‘for’ as Paul writes a little later on, ‘the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (14:17).