Accept one another
(13th September, Rev'd Rachel Winn)

Readings: Romans 14: 1-12 and Matthew 18: 21-35

In our Romans reading Paul is addressing the reality that Christians do things differently, and this can be a source of conflict. He is referring to arguments that have arisen because some believers are permitted to eat certain foods where others are not, some consider certain days sacred, others are indifferent.
We are not all the same, we do not fit one type, we all have our own ways that people find challenging.

There is nothing quite like being a parent to understand that children are all very different. Despite being brought up in the same household, with the same rules, each of them responded to our discipline in different ways - what worked for one simply didn't for another.
Elliot was easily the most challenging when it came to discipline.

'Naughty stair' story

When our children were young we had a 'naughty stair'. (Now today it would probably not be considered appropriate to label something 'naughty,' it would probably be called a 'thinking stair'…) This was a place where our children were asked to sit to reflect on what they had done wrong. They were expected to remain on the stair for one minute of every year of their life.
One day Elliot had committed some misdemeanour and was directed to the naughty stair. He was about 4 years old, so he had to sit there and contemplate his behaviour for 4 minutes. After the time was up I went back and said he needed to say sorry. He raised his chin defiantly and say 'no'.

So he was given another 4 minutes to think again.
The same thing happened.

After 12 minutes was up Adam and I were at a loss as to what to do; this was getting too painful for us both.

I went back: 'Elliot, you've been a long time there now. Would you like to say sorry now?'
'I'm not sorry' he replied.

Well, it had reached the point where we had to decide whether this was a battle worth continuing with. In this instance Elliot won!

Weary with it all I said; 'OK, you can get off the naughty stair now'
At this point he looked at me haughtily and said: 'No, I rather like it on here actually, I think I'll stay'

This was not a battle worth fighting over!

Paul advises the Roman believers that the things they are arguing over are not important enough for them to fall out. They are not matters that are **central** to faith.
The church today continues to debate and divide over so many things. We have theological differences, strong opinions about worship styles, differing attitudes to liturgy, feasts or festivals we may or may not celebrate, and alternative views on Holy Communion. These are what I perceive today as *important* in the church, but they distract us from the fundamental truth. They are what I call '**worthy red herrings;**' issues that matter greatly to us, but they are not central to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter to the Romans is a *warning* to us not to judge one another, but to understand and appreciate that we are all different; what is right for one person may not be right for another. Paul says we are to accept one another as God has accepted us - and that we are answerable only to **Christ**:
V 10: You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Are we busy looking around at what other Christians are doing to see if they measure up to *our* standards?

Do we look at other churches and think we have got it right and they have got it wrong?

I believe that the beauty of the body of Christ lies in our diversity. That it is fantastic that different churches can meet the diverse needs that reflect the needs of their community.

Paul's words call us to stop focussing on *what divides* and let our commonality draw us together ***v 7: For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.*** No, we are **one**.

We are baptised into one body - and I praise God that today Elliot joined us through baptism *into the* one body. We are united in Christ. Called out of darkness into his marvellous light. When we said our creed before Elliot's baptism today, we declared words of unity. We agreed *on what we agree on* - that God is the Father, source of all life, that Jesus, the son, took our human nature, died and rose again, and that the Holy Spirit gives us life and reveals Christ to the world. We said:
'This is our faith'

This is what **unites** us - and the other stuff we have to learn to navigate, ideally with bucket-loads of grace.

I am so encouraged by the work of Transforming Bromley Borough. TBB represents Churches throughout Bromley, working together to assist God in Transforming the whole borough with Christ's love. We meet quarterly to work out how we serve God practically. But we meet monthly to pray together.
In recent months I've frequently mentioned the **One Heart, One Voice prayer meeting**. It is SO GOOD to meet and pray with other church leaders of different denominations, because our differences fall away when we lift our hearts to pray - and when our focus turns away from 'church' to Jesus Christ.

In TBB is a mix of many denominations, there are many differences - it is actually a recipe for disaster to put us all into one venue together!
Even our *ways* of **praying** stand out in sharp contrast - some pray quietly and formally, some shout and wander around the room, some speak in tongues, break out in song… but

there is *something powerful* about adoring Christ in the presence of other believers. We are acknowledging that we one in Christ, and one day, regardless of who we are, and how we worshipped, every single one of us will bend the knee before Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Our **differences** will fall away in the light of his glory.
V11: It is written:
"'***As surely as I live,*' says the Lord,**
'***every knee will bow before me;***
every tongue will acknowledge God.'"
And each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Part two
'We will give an account'… **I wonder what kind of things we will have to account for?**

This brings me to our Gospel reading, where Peter asks Jesus:
Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Notice: the theme is forgiving brothers and sisters in Christ).

And Jesus' reply (I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times) coupled with the parable of the unmerciful servant, reveals that there are no limitations to our forgiveness of one another, and, what is more, we must forgive '**from the heart.**'

Forgiving repeatedly does not mean that we accept unjust or abusive situations; they should always be challenged. But it means that harbouring unforgiveness in the heart is not an option for Christians. **Why?** Because Christ died that we might be forgiven …and go on to forgive each other.

Jesus tells the parable of a servant who owed a huge amount of money that he could never repay. But he pleads with his master, who shows mercy and cancels the entire debt. Straight after, however, the servant meets someone who owes *him* a *meagre* debt, which he angrily demands is paid in full.

The parable is told to demonstrate that it is ***inconsistent*** for **us** to receive God's mercy but refuse to extend mercy to others.
Jesus died a cruel death.
He prayed for those who lied about him, spat on him, pushed a crown of thorns on his head and nailed him to a cross. And in the middle of the agony Jesus said:
'Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing'
And we, who can only have a partial understanding of what he endured, cannot forgive each other's petty offences and old hurts?

We nurse our grudges and harbour offence,
while we ourselves *are healed by his stripes.*

We need to forgive because this is necessary for our own state of forgiveness. Jesus taught us in The Lord's Prayer: '***forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*** *The two actions are intricately connected.*
In order to forgive we may have to take down walls we have built over the years. Some of us have put up barriers and our hearts have a protective shell around them. They have served us well, these hard shells, they keep us shielded from further hurt - but the trouble is, they also shield us from fully receiving God's love.
When we do not forgive, I believe we harm ourselves and stunt the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Are we holding on to unforgiveness?

What are the issues in the church we bear grudges over?

So often grudges that grow into full blown hostility began as smaller misunderstandings and inadequate attempts at communication. Judgement and bitterness creep in when we pile offence onto offence and do not choose to forgive.

Because, as my wise Dad taught me at a very early age, forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. If forgiveness were a feeling we would never let go of anything. No, there is a moment during which we either decide to seek the Spirit's help and release the bitterness - or we decide to keep a grip on the offence and let it sink deeper in.

There is a well known quote that says:
Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

The reason God forgives us is that sin leads to spiritual death. Jesus went to the cross, and through his death and resurrection we might know the liberating freedom of being forgiven.
In baptism, we are symbolically dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ.
We are set free! We are let off the enormous debt that hung around our shoulders. We couldn't pay it anyway, but thankfully we don't have to.

Jesus's response to Peter's question about forgiveness highlights a deep and real need for Christians to forgive each other, because God has forgiven us much more.
Forgiveness is an essential part of the Christian life.

Now I am not underestimating the struggle this can be for many people.
Sometimes offences in our lives are so great that they require a different level of forgiveness, that can only come with time and repeated handing over to God. He may have to gently pull away in stages the hard shell we have created.

I think of forgiveness as being like peeling a hard boiled egg.
I find myself picking off the shell trying not to damage the smooth surface of the egg. Sometimes you tap the egg and the shell sheds off easily, in large satisfying sections. But sometimes the shell has to be fractured all over to remove it. Maybe a large chunk peels away, but then you have to pick tiny fragments off, which annoyingly only come away a little at a time.

Deep unforgiveness may require many painstaking attempts by God to peel away the hard shell we have formed over our heart. God is patient and he will work with us on it, but, for our sake and for others, and for Christ's sake, the hard shell of unforgiveness needs to be completely removed.

So, to summarise…

Where there is unforgiveness the Bible is clear, it cannot remain. For our own spiritual and emotional health **and for our continued unity** we must forgive one another from the heart. This will release us to live lighter in spirit and open the way for God to pour his abundant, immeasurable love into our hearts.
Forgiveness may take longer than we would like. It is a decision and a process, not a feeling.

As Christians we are accountable to Christ, first and foremost. We are not to look at one another and ask '**which of us is right**' or '**who has wronged me**?' But we are to understand that God's mercy over our own lives will impact our attitudes towards our Brothers and Sisters. When we demonstrate mercy and forgiveness to one another, we reflect the master who let the servant off a huge debt.

And all the time, let us remember that the things that challenge us now and the differences that upset us, will fall away in an instant when we see our Lord Jesus Christ, face to face, and bow the knee before him.
It will ALL fade into insignificance in the light of his glory and majesty.