

“KEEPING THE BALANCE”

1. Corporate vs. Personal Responsibility

Romans 14:1-23

People often come up to me and suggest things that might be suitable subjects for sermons and there have been several things which have been mentioned recently which fall within the general area of tensions within our faith. We've often said how the Christian faith is full of apparent paradoxes in terms of both our doctrine and our practice or lifestyle. In the past we've dealt with some of them, such as the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Over the next two or three weeks, we're going to look at some of the things that we need to bear in mind to do with the way we live out our faith. There is usually a pretty thin line to be walked as we try to keep a precarious balance in the conduct of our Christian lives, both as individual Christians and as a church. Next week we'll consider how we balance the apparently competing demands of home, work and church. After that we will look at the balance to be struck between truth and love. But this morning we're going to consider for a few minutes the balance we need to keep between corporate or collective responsibility and personal responsibility.

It seems strange that, in a culture which is now setting so much store by individual human rights, there is so little regard for individual human responsibility. But whenever something goes wrong – at whatever level of our lives: national, local, church, personal – we need to find someone to blame. And the blame almost always is levelled at a group or a collective. I suppose that is partly due to the fact that, in an increasingly litigious society, where every mistake has to be paid for, you need to know whom to blame in order to know whom to sue – and an organisation or a company is more likely to come up with the damages. Of course, what we all know deep down, is that the only people who really profit from such exercises are lawyers.

But think of any disaster or crisis that has occurred in recent years and you will see that it is always very likely that the blame will be shifted from an individual to a group. The accidents that have occurred on the railways, for example, have not been due to the error of a particular driver or signalman, nor even to the decisions of a manager or a politician, but to the policies of Railtrack or the Department of Transport. When a man who had not slept for twenty four hours drove his Range Rover on to a railway track and caused a horrific accident, many people laid the blame not at his door, but at the door of the Highways Agency who had not put long enough crash barriers alongside the motorway.

And last weekend, in a completely different context, we saw French citizens devastated by the success of Jean-Marie Le Pen and blaming “the nation” for allowing him in, when many of them couldn't be bothered to get out and vote themselves. So banners appeared proclaiming “Ashamed to be French”, when they should probably have read, “Ashamed that I couldn't be bothered to participate in the democratic process.”

And, of course, we are by no means immune to all this in the church. How many of us have bemoaned the idea that “the Church” has taken the wrong decision? “The Church” doesn't care? “The Church” has done nothing? And we forget that we are all part of the Church. Somehow, this church, of which we are all a part, either by our formal commitment to membership or by our regular participation in its activities, becomes a body set up in opposition to us as individuals. Philip Yancey is a fine writer and his books have helped very many people, including me. But after you've read three or four, it becomes clear that he has a bit of a chip on his shoulder about the Church and the way it fails people – and particularly about the way it has failed him. Indeed, in one of his recent books he writes about being “*abused*” by the Church. He sees himself as a victim – like Sinead O'Connor used to portray herself with considerably greater publicity. Now, I'm not denying for one moment that the church fails people at particular points in their lives – and for that we need to repent. But we cannot see ourselves constantly as the individual victims of a group of people of which we are voluntarily a part. John Humphrys, in his book *Devil's Advocate* writes: “*Seeing ourselves as victims means we stop seeing ourselves as responsible.*” We

simply shift the blame – or, if you prefer a more neutral sounding word, responsibility – away from ourselves to a group of other, less identifiable people.

John Donne's famous sermon reminds us that "*No man is an Island, entire of itself*", but he goes on in that same sermon to point out that we still have a responsibility within the whole. The story of Israel as we have it recorded in the Old Testament further emphasises the complexities of this issue. The whole nation is punished by God for the sins of individuals – and there would certainly have been individuals who did not subscribe to the sins which were so widespread. In *Judges 21:25*, the very last verse of that book, we read, "*In those days Israel had no king: everyone did as he saw fit.*" There was a kind of anarchy in the land and everyone was responsible in some way for that. But later on in the history of that nation, we read that God promised to punish future generations, those who had not been directly responsible, but who were part of the nation. In more recent years we have seen a kind of reversal of that idea when people have tried to repent for the actions of long-dead groups – the Crusaders, the Conquistadors, the Slave Traders. There are all kinds of issues which are caught up in that which we cannot hope to address this morning, so let's focus in on a passage from the Bible which may point us in the right direction. We read from *Romans 14* a few minutes ago, and there are some helpful ideas here in the latter part of Paul's tremendous letter to the Christians in Rome, ideas which deal with the relationship we have with one another as a body of believers. It brings home to us something of the need for us to realise where responsibility ultimately lies.

Part of the problem we have is that evangelical Christianity in particular puts great emphasis on the *personal*. There is an expectation that we will at some time have "accepted Jesus as our personal Saviour". Jesus has come to save **me**. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, many people (80% in a recent survey) consider the church exists to meet **my** needs. So if it fails **me**, it fails as a church. The compartmentalisation of our Christian lives is very much bound up with this. Church worship on a Sunday: a quiet time, preferably in the "*closet*" each day: certain things to go to and to do, which are specifically Christian – these all fool us into thinking that being a Christian is just one compartment in an otherwise very crowded life – and, by extension, I am a single, individual Christian within the Church. I have my compartment within it, just as Christianity has its compartment in my life. I get on and do things without having to worry about the rest of them – whether it's my own refusal to accept the challenge of giving to the church or my trying to follow a lifestyle incompatible with the teaching of the church or my insistence on ignoring the church's policy on using fairly traded tea and coffee.

Now, of course, that idea has a strong basis in the Bible, but that is not the whole story, as I hope we shall see. But let's remain with it for a moment. Paul is very clear here that we are personally responsible for the way in which we live our lives. Look at *vv10-12*. Each of us will have to give an account of ourselves before God. Remember, Paul's writing this to Christians. Earlier in the letter he has been writing about humanity in general – and he has expounded the belief that Jesus has died for our sins. Our misdeeds, our wrong choices, our mistakes and our deliberate acts of rebellion can be dealt with through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who accept by faith the grace that God holds out to them will find a place in heaven for eternity. But God will still ask us to account for our actions. We will still have to stand before him and accept responsibility for all the times when we have acted wrongly – it is upon that that our reward in heaven will be based. It's why Paul warns the Corinthian Christians to be careful how they build their lives in *1 Corinthians 3*.

It can be rather sobering to recognise that we have to accept that responsibility, and there will be none of the opportunities for litigation that some enjoy here and now. We hear of lazy pupils who sue their teachers because they didn't get good enough grades. There is the story of a woman in the United States who successfully sued a supermarket chain because she cut her hand on a broken bottle – the bottle she broke over the head of her husband during a dispute with him in the supermarket. There will be no lawyers there to claim mitigating circumstances. There will be no expert witnesses to swear that it's all a result of your genes or your nursery school teacher. In a society where so much blame can be shifted off

ourselves on to the system, on to others, on to circumstances, we need to be aware of what God expects from us in terms of responsibility.

To help us in that, God has given us a conscience and a measure of intelligence. Paul writes about that in the first three chapters of this letter. We know deep down when we are doing something that will have dire consequences because it is wrong. And to help us in the exercise of our conscience, we have the Bible, God's own guidelines for ensuring that what we do is in line with his will for this world. That's important, because without the Bible as a yardstick, we could easily allow our consciences to be moulded to our own way of thinking again. And in order to be able to use our conscience and the Bible in the way God wants us to, he has given us, through his Holy Spirit, the gift of wisdom. That is something we need constantly to be keeping in good repair, and in *James 1:5*, we read that we can keep asking for more wisdom from God, who gives generously to those who want it.

So there is no doubt about it: the Bible clearly teaches that we have a responsibility as individuals to live as he commands us to. We cannot hide behind the excuse that it's everyone else's fault. But that can then lead us into a very individualistic mind-set – a mind-set that has been reinforced in recent years by government policy and media influence. The idea that we all act according to our own conscience and through our own interpretation of the Bible can still leave us with a community (if that's the right word) of people all doing their own thing. We may have accepted Jesus as our personal Saviour; we may have accepted the need to be responsible for our own actions and ideas. But where, then, does the concept of life in community come in? What about our nation, our company, our neighbourhood, our family, our church? When, in those groupings, we act together, who is responsible?

The plea that was so often heard in the wake of the Second World War, as Nazi officers were accused of the most appalling crimes against humanity – and a cry that has since been heard in other war-crime tribunals – was *"I was only following orders."* For the good of the whole, people felt that they should do as they were told – and in doing so wanted to wash their hands of all responsibility. "Wash their hands" of responsibility: does that remind you of anything? Pilate, as he finally and humiliatingly acquiesced to the will of the mob, symbolically washed his hands. In *Matthew 27:24* we read, *"Pilate took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility'."* "It's not my responsibility. You do what you want."

Brian Mawhinney, once a prominent figure in the Conservative Party and a well-respected (by some) evangelical Christian, was asked how he managed to square some of the things he did as Chairman of the Conservative Party with his Christian faith, when many people felt there was a great gap there. He responded by saying that he was employed as a Party official and a politician, so it was his Christian duty to do as his employers told him. "I was only following orders." The responsibility was not his – he was simply saying what he was told to say.

Even within the systems and groups in which we live and work, we still need to accept that we have some responsibility. The voice of Jesus still needs to be heard – or, *especially* needs to be heard – in such places. Particularly within the church we all share responsibility, we are all part of what goes on. There needs to be a recognition that we are all involved, all responsible – and therefore we all need to help and encourage and advise one another. In this passage we've read this morning, look at what Paul writes in *v19* – *"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."* Writing to the Christians in Corinth, he uses the image of a body and says, *"When one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).* And we see the idea of all being responsible together demonstrated most clearly in the Trinity. As God works in the world and tries to win it back to himself, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all involved, but it was on Jesus that fell the responsibility of going to the cross. He showed in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that he wished he could give up that responsibility, but for the good of the plan of God, he went through with it.

We are all, as Christians, “*in Christ*” (one of Paul’s favourite expressions) and so there is a kind of mutual accountability, there is a responsibility on each of us to live as God has told us, but there is also a responsibility to help one another. We need to look to one another’s needs, to see the ways in which our actions and words affect them. And we need, too, to be prepared to warn one another. If you look through what Paul has to say in his other letters, particularly to Timothy and Titus and the Church of the Thessalonians, you will see that he emphasises the need to point out graciously and in love those things that are going wrong, those ways in which the actions of individuals are affecting the whole community.

And this passage we’ve been looking at this morning encourages us to have particular regard for the “*weak*”, for those who are finding it very difficult indeed to follow the leading of their conscience and the Holy Spirit and need a great framework of rules and regulations to help them. If what you do is likely to affect someone else adversely, then think twice before doing it. However much you feel that your own life and your own actions are a private matter, that you are responsible only for yourself, remember that everything you do will have some impact on others and will also affect how the community of which you are a part is seen by others.

So what does all that mean, then? We’ve woven a number of threads together and possibly even confused some of them (and some of you!). That only goes to show that it is a complex issue. But the bottom line, I believe, is this. In the end, we will all have to stand before God and give an account of our actions and we will be held personally responsible for them. Part of the account we give will be of how we have behaved within our community, within our church. How have we showed and shared the love of God with each other? How have we spoken out for Christ and made his voice heard? How have we helped others to live as God wants them to? We have been called together as God’s people in order to build one another up in the love and knowledge of God and in order to carry out more effectively the mission with which we have been entrusted of making the good news of Jesus Christ known to all people. Together we must accept that responsibility, but all realise that we have a part to play within it.

And when we fail, God is there to offer forgiveness. He is there to lift us up. He is there to go on loving us, because Jesus took the responsibility of going to the cross for us.