

The early Christian communities in Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece, were a mix of converts from paganism and Judaism. Understandably at times tensions arose over the observance of dietary laws and Jewish feasts. The church at Rome was no different and Paul addresses these conflicts in the final part of his *Letter to the Romans* from which this morning's reading is taken.

Paul writes, leading into today's reading, "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. . . Some judge one [festival] day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike." He regarded these matters as peripheral to Christian faith and life and thus counselled community members to recognize that all parties to the disputes were in good conscience and were acting with the motive of honouring or living for the Lord. Paul continues in this vein in today's reading, extending what he had said in the context of the disputes to cover the whole Christian life: "We do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves."

Earlier in his letter Paul had written, "all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it, we belong to each other Love each other as much as brothers and sisters should, and have a profound respect for each other." Now in today's reading he says, "We live, not for ourselves, but for others". And more than this, he reminds the Roman Christians, "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Paul seems to be saying that their disharmony over dietary and other practices, which were uncalled for, had blinded them to their mutual bonds and their shared relationship with their Lord.

Earlier this month we celebrated the feast of St Gregory the Great, who was pope from 590 AD-604 AD, years of political and social upheaval, but also a time of growth of the faith in Western Europe. In a sermon of his in the Office of Readings for his feast day he laments his own shortcomings, while expressing his thanks to God for what had been given him, and in particular, for "the grace to see life whole."

Pope Gregory did not explain what he meant by the phrase, "to see life whole", but might we not consider that Paul had been inviting the fractious Christians at Rome through his account of their life in Christ "to see life whole"? Might not Paul be helping us also receive this gift with his reminder that "we live for others and for the Lord"?

Fr David Willis OP