

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, October 22, 2017**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Romans 14:17; John 15:9-17**  
**“Song and celebration”**

According to New Testament Statistics compiled by Fr Felix Just and available online at catholic-resources.org, there are 16 chapters, 433 verses and 7,111 words in St Paul’s letter to the Romans in the Greek New Testament. That means that the letter to the Romans ties with the First Letter to the Corinthians for the number of chapters, has four fewer verses, but has 282 more words.

The letter to the Romans is one of Paul’s later letters. It reflects his more fully developed theology, and sets out to deal with broad questions rather than answering specific questions or challenging, rebuking or encouraging his readers for things they were doing or things that were happening around them. For that reason, it is more solemn and restrained than the more passionate or fatherly tone that we see in some of his other letters.

But Paul had a remarkable ability. He could make a sudden jump from one subject to another without abandoning the first, but using the second to put the first into a much higher theological or Christological context.

One place he does it is in 2 Corinthians 8. There Paul is making an unapologetic appeal for money from the Christian community in Corinth. He doesn’t beat about the bush the way many of us preachers do when we talk about money. He even uses a bit of spiritual blackmail by telling the Christian community in Corinth how generous the Christian community in Macedonia had been, and how they could do better.

And then, without warning, he makes the jump. He challenges them with the profound statement that *you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich* 2 Corinthians 8:9. A profound summary of the faith right slap-bang in the middle of a financial appeal. Hmmm.

And he does the same thing in Romans 14. He has been talking about a variety of matters that all come down to the question of how Jesus’ followers should treat one another when they disagree about something. He has been talking specifically about disagreements about what they ate and drank – eating meat or vegetables only, drinking wine or abstaining. He has put it in the context of doing everything to the honour of the Lord, and not doing anything that might put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.

And then he pauses. Maybe I am reading too much of myself into Paul, but I can almost picture him stopping, thinking about it, pondering what he has just written, and then bursting out in

frustration at himself. Och, for goodness' sake, all these rules and regulations! ...*the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* Romans 14:17.

It's not about do's and don't's, about keeping all sorts of commandments, the trivial rules and nit-picking, petty-fogging regulations that he had been discussing. It's about righteousness: a right relationship with God and with other people. It's about decency, compassion, morality, integrity, all the qualities that reflect the nature of God. And it's about peace: peace with God, the peace that comes from knowing that we are the redeemed, forgiven, welcomed, and renewed children of the God whose nature is love. And it's about joy in the Holy Spirit: that deep-down, soul-refreshing, life-enriching, liberating sense of satisfaction and fulfilment that comes from realising that we are living the life that we were made to live, both in God's first creation and, through faith in Jesus Christ, in God's new creation.

So what if we disagree about what we think we should or shouldn't eat? So what if we have different opinions about alcohol consumption? So what if we have different opinions about any number of things? We have something that brings us together and binds us together and holds us together, something that is far stronger than whatever we think may separate us.

We are loved by our God and Father, and called to abide in his love made known in Jesus Christ, so that his joy may be in us, and so that our joy may be complete. Loved by that love, what can diminish our joy in the Holy Spirit? And loved by that love, what can divide us?

But sometimes we look for things to divide us. I know I have told you before the story that tells of something that supposedly happened when Robinson Crusoe was rescued after his many years alone on his desert island. His rescuers noticed that as well as his living shelter, there were two other structures on the island. They asked him what these were. 'Well,' he replied, 'that one is my church. I go there every week to worship.'

'And what about the other one?' they asked.

'Oh,' he said. 'That's the church I used to go to, but I stopped going there because I didn't like the way they do things.'

I asked Torin to put the choir to work in this service today, partly to showcase their talents, but more importantly because what better way is there to express our faith, our community and our joy than in song? OK, Cathy might say we could do it in dance, but for those of us who are more terpsichoreally-challenged, let's enjoy the choir once again. For if we really believe that the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, how can we keep from singing?