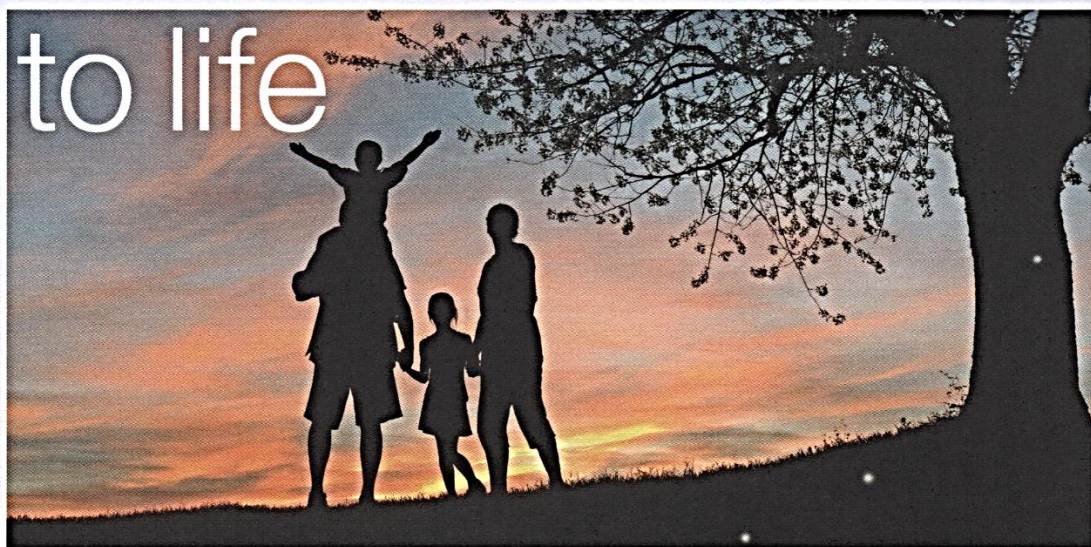


A grounded approach

Heather Smith *reflects on*
John 1:6-8. 19-28

In these days of food fads and lose-weight-quickly diets it may be hard to understand why Roman Christians were so vexed about eating meat. The issue is clear and simple – is it right to eat meat sacrificed to an idol? Such meat is regularly on sale but with no provenance to guide them, how are Christians to know where their meat comes from?

Some believe eating sacrificed meat makes no difference to their faith; others are not so sure and abstain from eating any meat. The issue becomes polarised and judgements are made about people and their faith – some are strong in faith, others weak. Being judgemental leads to division and this is where Paul steps in. He reminds the Romans of God's love and welcome for all who follow the way of Christ. They are called to rejoice in the variety of those whom



God calls, not to judge one another. Life would be much easier if they could agree one course of action, right or wrong, but they can't, so fear takes over and positions harden.

Perhaps it is part of human nature to be suspicious and

fearful of those who are different from us, but it is not God's way, for God loves indiscriminately and lavishly. God also calls a strange assortment of people – something that becomes clear every time we look in a mirror. ☺

Teach us to find our identity in you, Lord, and to follow the path that you have planned. May our lives point others to you and contribute to the work of your kingdom. Amen.

Gifts wrapped and unwrapped

by Julia McGuinness

Wrapping gifts is fun for some, a challenge for others. But even as we struggle with sellotaped fingers, we can tuck a whispered prayer into the bright paper's folds – a priceless gift for a loved one.

Piles of Christmas presents may make us wonder whether we are encouraging a celebration of consumerism rather than Christ. A new tradition for family presents

has emerged to counter this in recent years – the four-gift rule: something they want; something they need; something to wear; something to read. To this, someone has added a fifth – something they didn't know they wanted.

Scripture calls us to be clothed in Christ. This is not wrapping up our faith, but rather displaying Christ's character to a needy world that seems not to know how much it wants Jesus' love and forgiveness. Offering our faith unwrapped and visible to those around us may be as much of a Christmas challenge as giving a seamlessly wrapped package. ☺

“The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author

Advent hymns

“Hills of the North, Rejoice” (Charles Edward Oakley)

by Caroline Hodgson

This hymn is sometimes called the missionary carol, although its author, Charles Edward Oakley, doesn't appear to have travelled very much in his short life. Born in 1832 and educated at Oxford, he entered holy orders in 1855 before becoming Rector of Wickwar in Gloucestershire and later Rector of St Paul's in Covent Garden. He died in 1865.

Different versions are found in different hymnbooks, but Oakley's words in particular take us on a tour of faraway places. As we sing we travel to all four points of the compass. The second verse summons the “Isles of the southern seas”; the third verse commands the “Lands of the East” to awake; the fourth is addressed to the “Shores of the utmost West”, while last verse brings them all together.

The composer of the most popular tune, Martin Shaw, named his composition Little Cornard, after the Suffolk village where he spent his honeymoon. Each line starts restrained, as though the words are lurking in the “coral caves” of the “southern seas”, but by the end of each verse they leap out with a triumphant, joyful flourish. ☺