Questions for reflection:

How would we and our communities act differently if we thought that the old world was about to end and a new one about to begin? Do we as a culture think that we can change the world, or are we increasingly fatalistic and assume that things must remain as they are? What are the consequences of such attitudes? How does people's spiritual vision change as they approach death? What difference does it make if we believe that the dead still care about our world?

47. Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but do not get involved in arguments about opinions. One person's faith lets them eat everything, but the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not those who eat despise those who do not, and let not those who do not eat judge those who do, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? Whether they succeed or fail is for their own master to decide, and they will succeed, for the Lord is able to make them do so. Some people judge that one day is more important than another. Others judge that every day is alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in their own mind. Those who are concerned about special days show concern for the Lord, and those who eat show concern for the Lord, for they give thanks to God. And those who do not eat do so from concern for the Lord. They also give thanks to God. None of us lives just for ourselves, and no one dies just for ourselves. For when we are alive, we live for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. Because this is the reason Christ died and came back to life, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we all will stand before God's tribunal. It is written, "I swear by my life, the Lord says, every knee will bow to me and every tongue will
make a confession to God” [Isa. 45:23]. So then each of us will give an account of ourselves. (14:1–12)

In all probability, the Christian readers that Paul calls the “weak” and the “strong” were respectively conservative Jews who followed the Mosaic Law in detail and Gentiles and liberal Jews who did not. We know that the relationship between conservative Jewish Christians and other members of the church was a continuing problem in the first century. In addition, the two issues that Paul specifically cites, namely the observance of special days and the eating of special diets, were important dividing points between the two groups. Conservative Jews rigorously observed the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, and they also celebrated the other holidays prescribed by the Old Testament. Gentiles, of course, did not keep these days. In addition, conservative Jews could eat meat only under special circumstances. The meat had to come from certain types of animals, rather than others; the blood had to be drained out of it; and, naturally, it could not in any way be associated with Pagan religious practice. If such special meat was unavailable, observant Jews had to be vegetarians. Gentiles, by contrast, had no scruples about eating any meat. In a few verses Paul will also mention the possibility that drinking wine might offend someone (14:21). Although Jews certainly had no scruples about drinking wine in general, there is evidence that some Jews considered it improper to drink wine which came from Pagans (e.g., Dan. 1:8, 12–16).

The special history of the Roman church had strained the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians there. Christianity arrived in Rome very early. Paul writing in the fifties remarks that he had wanted to visit the church in Rome for “many years” (15:23). Early Christianity was primarily Jewish, and we must suppose that initially the majority of Christians at Rome were Jews. Naturally, under these circumstances, the leaders of the church had been Jewish, and the congregation as a whole had followed Jewish customs. At some point, however, disturbances between Jewish Christians and other Jews had led
the Roman authorities to expel many Jews—including the Christian ones—from the city. After the expulsions, the remaining church was suddenly Gentile. In the absence of their Jewish brothers and sisters, Gentiles assumed the leadership posts and presumably stopped observing Jewish customs. Then at some point the Jewish Christians who had been expelled from Rome began to return. Luke explicitly tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were among those who had been expelled (Acts 18:2), but by the time Paul was writing Romans, they were back in the capital, since Paul sends them his greetings (Rom. 16:3). Paul himself may refer to the fact that Jewish Christians were continuing to trickle into Rome. Thus, in the passage we are dealing with now he exhorts the “strong” Romans Christians to “welcome” those whose faith is weak. Conservative Jewish Christians upon returning home cannot have been happy with the changes in the church that had occurred in their absence. Consequently, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians at Rome was at best strained.

Nevertheless, both Jewish and Gentile Christians wanted to live together in peace. They had originated from the same congregation, and despite their differences, they worshipped the same Lord.

Of course, Paul wanted to help the two groups reconcile. Theologically, he was committed to the principle that in Christ “there is no Jew or Greek” (Gal. 3:28). In addition, Paul must have realized that if he could be a reconciler he would earn the gratitude of the Roman church as a whole, and the church might respond by giving him the assistance that he needed for his missions to Jerusalem and Spain. Of course, if Paul got a reputation for being a reconciler, this reputation might help him elsewhere too, especially in the upcoming mission to Jerusalem. Conservative Jewish Christians there undoubtedly saw Paul as divisive.

To reconcile the two sides, however, Paul had to be even-handed. If he simply told one side it was in the wrong and should reform, it would merely become angry.
Paul begins by insisting that both sides honor God through their distinctive practices, and, hence, God accepts both groups. The strong honor God by exercising the freedom that God has given them to eat anything and not to observe special days. The weak honor God by eating the diets and observing the holidays that they believe God commands. In their prayers both sides give thanks. God who is primarily concerned with our intent accepts both expressions of devotion.

Paul emphasizes that since God accepts both groups, they must in turn accept one another. As Christians we do not live for ourselves; we live for God. Hence, if God accepts Christians who observe different customs than we do, we must accept these people as well. Judgment belongs to God alone, and we sin whenever we condemn Christian brothers and sisters whom God welcomes. Of course, at the last judgment we will have to give an account to him of how we have treated one another. As so often in this letter, Paul ultimately bases his appeal on the belief that there is one God, and he will judge the world.

We may note in passing that once again Paul insists that at the judgment Christians will have to suffer for their sins. When he earlier insisted that we are justified by faith, Paul did not mean that Christians would not have to face final judgment. Instead, he meant that through God’s mercy Christians at their baptism were able to leave the realm controlled by sin and entered the realm where the Holy Spirit is at work. Of course, the God who had mercy in the past will again be merciful in the future and Christians will ultimately be saved. Nevertheless, we will have to suffer for the wrongs we have done.

In accordance with the overall structure of the letter, Paul here addresses the Gentile Christians at Rome. As we have seen, in the first half of the letter Paul addresses the Jews (2:17–29, 7:1) and tells them not to look down on the Gentiles. By contrast in the second half, Paul addresses the Gentiles (11:13–32) and tells them not to boast against the Jews. Here Paul continues to speak to the “strong” and tells them to “welcome” the “weak.”
Because Paul is addressing the Gentiles, conservative Jewish readers would not in this context have taken great offense at being labeled as “weak.” Clearly, the Jewish Christians did not consider themselves to be “weak.” It was their Gentile critics who saw them as such. Nevertheless, the conservatives knew that the other side had this viewpoint. Hence, since Paul was addressing the other side, the Jews would not have greatly objected to him using its language.

For Christians today, Paul’s endorsement of pluralism within the church is especially reassuring. In earlier times European missionaries often assumed that their own ethnic customs were an essential part of the Christian message and, hence, imposed those customs on converts in non-European areas. One result was that the converts experienced alienation from the cultural achievements of their own societies. Today we are increasingly aware that Christianity can legitimately take many forms and that we do not have to agree on externals to be fully one in Christ. It is reassuring to realize that at the very beginning of Christianity Paul had already articulated this awareness and insisted that what we eat or what holidays we observe is not important provided that we intend to honor God.

Questions for reflection:

Do we today have divisions in the church which have similarities to the split between the strong and the weak over keeping special diets and special days? Do we realize that when people we disagree with intend to honor God, they really do honor him? Do we in the church act as if people are primarily accountable to God rather than to us?
Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Rather, make this resolution, not to put a stumbling block or an obstacle before a brother or sister. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is inherently unclean, but for a person who considers it to be unclean, for them it is unclean. If your brother or sister is hurt by your food, you are no longer behaving lovingly. Do not let your food destroy a person for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let your goodness be attacked as bad. For God’s kingdom is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Anyone who thus serves Christ is pleasing to God and respected among human beings. So then let us pursue what leads to peace and mutual edification. Do not for the sake of food ruin God’s work. All things are clean but are bad for people who eat them because they have stumbled. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or engage in anything by which your brother or sister stumbles. As for you, keep to yourself the convictions that you hold in the presence of God. Blessed are they who do not have misgivings over what they approve for themselves. But those who doubt are condemned if they eat because they did not do so from faith. Everything that is not from faith is sinful. (14:13–23)

Paul continues to be even-handed as he attempts to reconcile the strong and the weak. Thus, on the one hand, he clearly states that theologically the strong are correct. Nothing is inherently unclean. Yet, on the other hand, he insists that pastorally the weak are correct. In practice the strong should defer to the weak. Instead of flaunting their liberty, the strong should be discrete and do nothing that would tempt the weak to act against their own consciences.

Of course, this even-handed approach would have appealed to both groups. The strong would have been flattered by the claim that their theology was correct. The weak would have been relieved by Paul’s insistence that the strong should not make life difficult for them.
Nevertheless, what Paul writes is fully in accord with his theological principle that our intentions are what are most important and, hence, it is always sinful to act against our consciences. Thus, Paul insists that the Gentiles (along with their liberal Jewish allies) are the "strong," precisely because they know that nothing is inherently clean, and, hence, when they eat meat or ignore certain holidays, they intend to do what is right. Of course, by intending to do what is right, they actually do it. By contrast, if someone believes that something is unclean, then it is in fact unclean for that person. If the weak eat meat or ignore holidays even though their consciences object, they have chosen to do what they believe is wrong. Of course, this choice is wrong. Moreover, by acting against their consciences, the weak also become psychologically fragmented. They are making decisions which part of their personality condemns. Hence, the "strong" are under the obligation to accommodate the weak so the latter do not act against their consciences.

Paul's presentation here is also an expression of his theological principle that freedom from the law can only come through faith. Without trusting in the salvation that God offers us through Jesus, we are in slavery to sin and to law. Even "weak" Christians are to some extent in such slavery still because their consciences have not fully accepted the implications of the freedom Jesus has given us. To try to escape our slavery by violating the dictates of our conscience rather than by receiving the good news of Jesus is sin. Hence, Paul can summarize his position by insisting, "Everything that is not from faith is sinful."

The principle that all things are inherently clean is especially useful today as we struggle with contemporary sexual issues. In the past, we often condemned certain activities as being dirty or distasteful. Paul's principle that nothing is inherently unclean reminds us that the only Christian test for whether or not something is ethical is whether or not it promotes human well being. As Paul reminds us, the kingdom of God—that is the ideal world which God through Jesus is calling into being—is about "righteousness and peace and joy in
the Holy Spirit," and, hence, anything which helps produce these is in accordance with God’s will.

Questions for reflection:

Are there issues in which we realize that something that others think is sinful really is not? On such issues so we respect the consciences of our weaker fellow Christians? Or do we somehow pressure others to go along with the freedom we enjoy thanks to our greater theological sophistication? Do we agree that all things are inherently clean? Do some things that we find distasteful produce righteousness, peace, and joy in other people’s lives?

49. Romans 15:1–2

We the strong ought to put up with the infirmities of the weak and not do as we please. Let each of us please our neighbor for their benefit and edification. (15:1–2)

As Paul begins to conclude his remarks on how the strong and the weak should act, he maintains his even-handedness by explicitly identifying himself with one side and then urging that side to make concessions. Thus he explicitly states that he himself is one of the strong. Yet, he then insists that it is the strong who must try to please the weak.

Of course, this conclusion continues the pattern that in the second half of Romans Paul addresses the Gentiles and asks them to accommodate conservative Jews.

Paul’s emphasis that the strong should defer to the weak reflects his conviction that the ultimate test of Christian maturity is love. The freedom that Christ gives is not for self-indulgence but charity. The strong by their theological sophistication have freed themselves from legal scruples, but this freedom must never be used to hurt others. On the contrary, precisely because