

## **Sermon, Leith Valley 31 July 2016**

### **Introduction to Romans**

I've been asked to give an introduction to Paul's letter to the Romans. We will be focussing on this letter for the next few Sundays.

How do we understand Romans? Let me give some historical background. Paul wrote Romans around 55 AD. Jesus had been crucified around 33 – so 22 years earlier.

Paul is writing to Christians in a church he had not founded and he has never visited them either – although he had wanted to do so. We don't actually know when the Church in Rome began – or who the first Christians there were. There were Jews from Rome at Pentecost according to Acts 2 – perhaps some of them were converted went back to Rome and founded the church there.

But a key event happened in 49 AD – Claudius, the Roman emperor of the time, expelled Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome. There is some debate about this, but most commentators argue that Claudius expelled all the Jews because of trouble in the Jewish community in Rome over *Christian preaching*.<sup>1</sup>

This sort of trouble often occurred in Jewish communities as a result of Christian preaching – as we learn from Acts. Preaching about Jesus was controversial among Jews – for Christians preached about Jesus, who had been crucified, but who they believed was the Messiah and who had been raised from the dead. Both the crucifixion of the Messiah and the resurrection of one who had suffered the cursed death of crucifixion was hard for Jews to accept. Some Jews accepted the Christian preaching and followed the way of Jesus, and others did not – and so they opposed Christian preaching. The Jewish community was thus divided.

This sort of preaching seems to have happened in Rome in 49 – and the result was that there was lots of trouble in the Jewish community in the city. The emperor Claudius reacted by expelling the Jewish community from the city – including Jewish Christians who would look like ordinary Jews to the Romans.

We know about this from a Roman author Suetonius, but also from Acts 18:2, which is about Paul in Corinth:

There [in Corinth] he [Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.

Priscilla and Aquila were Jewish Christians who had been kicked out of Rome in 49 and were now living in Corinth.

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<sup>1</sup> We are told by Suetonius that Claudius 'expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus'.

So the only Christians who would still be living in Rome in 50 AD were Gentile Christians – non-Jews. Claudius died in 54 CE – and with his death his edict expelling Jews (and Jewish Christians) from Rome lapsed – and so they could come home.

But what sort of home-coming did these Jewish Christians have in Rome? While they were away from Rome – for about five years - all the Christians in Rome had been Gentile Christians. They would have been Romans, but there would have been people from other ethnic groups who had travelled to Rome – perhaps Greeks from Corinth or Ephesus or Athens and other ethnicities too.

How would these Gentile Christians in Rome treat the Jewish Christians who returned home? In their absence, the church in Rome had probably become decidedly ‘Gentile’, decidedly ‘Roman’ and ‘Greek’. All the leaders would be Gentile Christians; the communities would have expressed who they were in non-Jewish terms and would have grown away from the Jewish law – and so had nothing to do with Jewish food laws for example. Some of these Gentile Christians would simply be unfamiliar with Jewish ways – and as good Romans or Greeks, they probably looked down on Jews. So in 54 when the Jewish Christians returned, relations between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians would have been decidedly frosty. Gentile Christians were probably looking down on Jewish Christians.

What indications of this are there in Romans itself? This is most obvious in Rom 11:17-21. Paul has used the analogy of the olive tree to speak of Israel. Gentiles then are ‘wild olive shoots’. Paul writes:

<sup>17</sup> But if some of the branches were broken off [that is, some Jews], and you, a wild olive shoot [that is, you Gentiles], were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, <sup>18</sup> do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root [Israel] that supports you [Gentile Christians]. <sup>19</sup> You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” <sup>20</sup> That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. <sup>21</sup> For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

And Rom 15:7-9: <sup>7</sup> Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised [Israel] on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.<sup>2</sup>

So there was a divide between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in Rome – evident in lots of other parts of the letter too. We have a situation of tension between two ethnic groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Or Rom 14:1-4: <sup>1</sup> Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. <sup>2</sup> Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. And also Rom 12:16

Gentile Christians are looking down on Jewish Christians. What does Paul say into this context?

Paul's *overall* message in Romans in this context is one of equality and unity in Christ. All have sinned - both Jew and Gentile – and all can be saved by Christ. The details of his argument – which are long and sometimes complicated - should not obscure for us that this is his overall message. Jew and Gentile are sinners; Jew and Gentile can be and are being saved.

So in Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul argues that both Jew and Gentile are sinners. In Rom 3:21—31 he outlines that all can be justified by God's grace, and asks in Rom 3:29-30:

<sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Then Paul encourages Gentile Christians to appreciate their heritage in Israel – that they now have Abraham as their ancestor (Rom 4), and are part of God's people. Gentile Christians are not to look down on Jewish Christians and Jewish Christians should accept that the Gospel is for Gentiles – just as much as it is for them. In Rom 6-8 he explains how God's blessings belong not just to Israel but work in the present for all. In Rom 9-11 he discusses God's purposes for Israel itself, despite Jewish unbelief. And in Rom 12-15 he discusses how Jew and Gentile should get along together in the church. So Jew and Gentile should accept one another freely as Christ has accepted them (15:7).

There is another broader reason why Paul wrote Romans too – though it is connected to what I have said. Paul wants to go to Spain on mission, as he tells us in Rom 15:23-24:

'But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.'

And he would like the Roman Christians to support him in this. So he wants them to be united, to accept his gospel, and to be willing to support a mission that included Jews. Hence, we can understand why he says what he does in Romans.

So the heart of Romans is 'all one in Christ'. All are sinners, all can be saved. He particularly wants to show how the Gospel of Jesus Christ bridges the huge ethnic divide between Jews and Gentiles. For this was the divide in the ancient world. If the Gospel could bridge *this* ethnic divide – and a huge divide it was - it could bridge all divides.

So Paul's message is that the Gospel is universal. Universal need; universal solution. That is why in Romans 5 Paul speaks of humanity as 'in Adam' and 'in Christ'.<sup>3</sup> The solution to the

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<sup>3</sup> <sup>12</sup> Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ... <sup>14</sup> Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. <sup>15</sup> But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many

human plight of sin – which Paul outlines in Rom 1:18-3:20 – is ‘Adam-wide’ – it covers all humanity. How can it be ‘Adam-wide’? Because it depends on faith – Rom 4. It does not depend on the Jewish law, good as the law was. But the Law was only given to Israel. No -- salvation is by faith. And the solution is for all through the Spirit and in fact is creation-wide – Romans 8.

And note his introduction in Rom 1:16-17:

<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” He is expressing the oneness of all of us in Christ – the Gospel is for the Jew first and also to the Greek. God’s covenant faithfulness to all humanity is expressed in the Gospel. And it is through faith.

So how does this apply to us?

It seems to me that one of the key issues facing our world is relations between different people – of one group of people looking down at another group. In its extreme form, its racism. In less extreme forms its simply one group not wanting to get on with another.

Perhaps you might say that racism isn’t quite the problem that it was. Perhaps so. But what a world we live in. Its hard to avoid the conclusion that Donald Trump doesn’t like Mexicans or Muslims. To be somewhat bold, its hard to avoid the conclusion that at least part of the reason for Brexit is that many in the UK did not like the influx of eastern Europeans into the UK – and the jobs that they took. And things like immigration and visas make it clearer and clearer that all around the world countries are becoming less and less tolerant of difference. Now there are a whole lot of reasons for that, but our world is marked by racial intolerance, by fear of difference, by killing people simply because they do not belong to our group. And its not just that there are extremists. I think many, many people basically don’t like people who are ‘not us’.

And here in NZ, we should not think that everything is fine. Scratch below the surface of our society, and there is, I think, much tension, much that looks like frosty relations between different sorts of people.

And I’m not just talking about race. The implications of the Gospel being for all and that all are sinners, all can be saved – is that any sense of one group looking down on another is wrong. The rich must not look down on those who are less fortunate. Those living in one place are not to look down on others. And so on. Paul focuses on ethnic relations because *that* is the issue of the day. But what he says applies to all sorts of relations – no one is to look down on any other person or group.

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died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ...<sup>18</sup> Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

How much then our world *needs* a gospel of ‘all are one in Christ Jesus’. We are all equal – equally sinners but also equally able to be saved. Christ is Lord of all. We all stand before him – sinners, able to be saved. And we are that because that is how God sees us. What could be more important in our world today, than a Gospel that says we are all equal – all equally sinners before God, but all equally able to be saved through Jesus Christ?

What’s it like to be looked down on because of your race, or the colour of your skin, or because of your gender, or how you look?

I’ve not often experienced this.

In Muscat, capital of Oman.

In Dubai – a street full of Pakistanis.

In hind sight – not at the time - both have been good experiences for me – where I learned firsthand what it is like to be treated ‘differently’ or to be different. To stand out and be disliked because of that.

One of the key gifts the church can give the world is the message that all people stand before God as equal – equally loved. All have sinned but all can be saved. And so we should treat each other as equals.

Yet how are we getting on in the church in NZ or here? How well do we get on with ‘others’ who are different from us – of difference ethnicities, and in other ways too.

One of the joys of my job is to interact with a whole range of people of different cultures. I can genuinely say that I have experienced that one-ness in Christ. While we were in the UK recently we went to Holy Trinity Brompton, the home of Alpha. I was particularly struck by the multi-cultural congregation – it reflected multi-cultural London!

Recall one of the visions of Revelation: (7:9-10)

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

So why should we be open to those who are different?

Because we should be tolerant? Well that’s a start. But this is a gospel imperative – something the Gospel calls us to. As followers of Jesus Christ, we know that we, and all people, are sinners in need to salvation. There is no ‘special, privileged group’ in the Kingdom. And as followers of Jesus Christ, we know that we have been saved – not because of our heritage, our history, or our talents, or the colour of our skin – but because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – and because of that alone. And doesn’t this sound like Jesus - the one who accepted the Syrophenician woman, who discussed serious theology with the Samaritan woman at the well, and who made a Samaritan the hero of the story of ‘the Good Samaritan’. Our acceptance of one another is because we have all been accepted by Christ. Our oneness in Christ – our unity in him – is because of Christ, because of what he has done.

We are brothers and sisters – because of Christ.<sup>4</sup> So how should we treat other Christians who are different from us? As brothers and sisters, as those who share in the same table as us. As those who belong just as much as we do!

How then should we treat outsiders? As people for whom Christ died – whether they know it or not. Rom 5:6-8 puts it clearly:

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Christ died for us – he died for all. Who are we to look down on those for whom Christ died – and in that way showed us that Christ loves all people.

Now I don't find this easy. I was brought up in white, middle class Christchurch. People like me were all around me. To be different was unusual! My 'default' setting from my background is simply to get on most easily with people like me.

I've had to learn to overcome that default setting – and to treat people who are different as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Or those who are not Christians, as people for whom Christ died, just as he died for me. And I've got a good way to go ...

But what riches there are in the diversity of God's people.

Take food as an example. I very much like Thai, Indian, Chinese and Turkish food. Actually I like any food. But I like these in particular. Imagine if the only food around was 'European' – whatever that is! Imagine all that we'd miss out on! Similarly in the Kingdom.

May we rejoice that the Gospel is for all. That we are all one in Christ Jesus. That all people are those for whom Christ died. May we love others as Christ has first loved us. To Christ be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See Rom 8:29: Christ is 'the firstborn among many brothers and sisters'.