

11th September 2016

A Look at Romans

Romans 1.16-17, 3.21-31

In this time leading up to Advent I'm going to be using our sermon slots to preach on Paul's letter to the Romans.

This is arguably one of the hardest books in the Bible to understand. Yet it has been extremely influential in the life of the church as theologians such as Augustine, Luther and Karl Barth have studied it and come back with a fresh and challenging word from God. In Luther's case it inspired the Reformation, which started 500 years ago next October and through which the Reformed Church came into being. Many regard it as the Himalayas of the New Testament, the theological heights; certainly it is Paul's greatest letter. It gives an overview of the entire Christian message so is a good way to look again at our faith and how we understand it in the contemporary world.

All of Paul's other letters were sent to churches that he had founded. The church in Rome was not founded by him. He writes this letter for at least three reasons.

First to introduce himself in the hope that before long he will be able to visit them in person, as he travels on to bring the gospel to Spain.

Secondly he writes to enlist the prayers of the Roman church for his upcoming visit to Jerusalem where he is going to take an offering of money from the non Jewish churches to the poor people of the churches in Jerusalem.

The third reason he writes is that he has some knowledge of their situation in Rome. The earliest Christian community met in houses, so when you hear the phrase the Church in Rome, don't think of the Vatican and St Peter's. The first church was probably mainly made up of Jewish Christians but around 49AD emperor Claudius forced the Jews to leave Rome, possibly because there

had been trouble with the arrival of Christianity within their community. It meant that Gentile believers (that is non Jewish believers) made up virtually all of the small Christian congregations. When Paul writes Romans, Claudius had died and his edict against the Jews had been lifted. Jewish Christians were now returning to Rome and Paul knows some of them. He writes because he is concerned that when they return they will find a church that welcomes all believers, that can be inclusive and cope with diversity and the potential rivalries and disputes that may bring.

For at least these reasons, Paul writes his letter to the church at Rome. The letter is full of his passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. For him, and he believes for all humanity, Jesus is the one in whom God turns history around, doing what is right for the Roman Christians and for the whole creation.

Verses 16 and 17 of chapter one mark the end of Paul's thanksgiving and the beginning of the main business of the letter. In these verses Paul begins to share the spiritual gift of faith with the Romans.

When Paul says he is not ashamed of this good news, this is probably not because someone has suggested that he ought to be ashamed or that there is something shameful about the gospel. It is more likely an indirect way of saying 'I take great pride in this good news, not in myself, but in the news I proclaim. I have great confidence in this gospel.'

The phrase for us may take on a slightly different meaning. We are glad enough to be Christians but often not glad to talk much about our faith. Tonight we will share about our experiences in Nicaragua. It is a very different culture to ours and people there are not ashamed to be Christian nor to discuss matters of faith in public.

Our supposedly secular culture is full of people who have faith in the scientific method, in the powers of their own intellect, in the virtues of self fulfilment, in their family, maybe even in their football team. What many people today do not believe is that there is one ultimate source and goal of loyalty – the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul would say that that God, the true God, judges and completes all our other loyalties. The theologian Paul Tillich described God as our ‘ultimate concern’.

For Paul the gospel has saving power for everyone who has faith. First big theme is mentioned – salvation.

In chapters one to three Paul describes what we need saving from. Most people in Britain aren’t interested in Christianity because they don’t see a need. They don’t need saving and if they did they would save themselves. How would you persuade people that they had a need for Christ in their lives? Paul tries to outline humanity’s need in these first few chapters.

He describes the human condition of sin. The concept of sin has been trivialised in our present culture. People talk about how many calories a cream cake will cost you in sins. Or else it is seen as something to do with sex that implies you are a bit of a dare and a rebel. I remember as a ten year old sat in the back seat of the family car and my mother was talking to my father in the front about the latest scandal of someone who had an affair with someone else and had now moved in with them. They are ‘living in sin’ was her solemn judgement and turning to me in the back said if I ever did something like that I’d be struck out of her will! Psychologists have tried to jettison the concept of sin and relativize all behaviour as neither right nor wrong but personal choice and seen guilt as a damaging emotion. Here in the 21st century sin seems to have lost its force.

Paul has commonly been thought to understand sin as pride. Augustine saw the root sin as pride, a self centeredness, an

attitude that displaces God as the true centre of one’s being. Certainly in these three opening chapters Paul describes how we give up the worship of the true God for lots of lesser gods and so we lose our way. (verse 21-23). Despite evidence for God in nature and the world we act as if God doesn’t exist. Dostoevsky the Russian writer famously said: ‘if God does not exist everything is permissible’. We live as though we will never be accountable to our Creator, or indeed to anyone else, so long as we can get away with it. Paul writes about the logical outcome of this attitude to disbelief in God in verse 28:

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.

The four verses before this section are the controversial remarks Paul makes about homosexual practice. Suffice to say there has been much debate about the meaning of these verses. In their context they belong to the argument about rejecting God and turning to idolatry.

A lot of scholars make the point that Paul writes about homosexual acts that he knew of: men preying on boys, rape, exploitation and sex with male prostitutes in pagan temples as part of idolatrous rituals. These acts were usually carried out by heterosexuals ‘perverting their nature’ and also acting in abhorrent ways: abuse, exploitation, idolatry. Too right Paul

wants to condemn them (and lists them alongside adulterers, thieves, idolaters etc. in 1 Cor 6.9) and so should we. There are still laws against such things.

But it is argued that what Paul isn't writing about, nor arguably knows nothing of, is the homosexual orientation and loving, committed homosexual relationships. In other words it all depends on what type of homosexuality you want to condemn and what type you want to affirm, as much as one would want to condemn heterosexuality if it was abusive, exploitative, non-consensual, idolatrous etc.

There has been real discussion in recent decades about what is natural? My father went to school in the 1920s and was left handed. His teacher at primary school whacked him with a cane every time he used his left hand to write, saying that people who wrote with their left hand were unnatural and influenced by the devil. He had to learn to write with his right hand but still cut bread with his left and batted left handed at cricket.

A couple of generations ago it was still believed it was unnatural to be homosexual. But cultural attitudes have changed and the majority of people accept there will always be a minority of people who will be attracted to the same sex. That is natural. Now there is much exploration of what it means to be gendered. Can we define people as male or female in a binary manner of opposites? Such discussion is very threatening for many people. Some look to the church to reaffirm order and certainty believing that God had given a natural order in creation, creating us male and female and specific roles and relationships and a symptom of the rejection of God is that chaos, confusion and disorder reigns. Others see the church as fearful, too inflexible in its outlook and condemnatory.

The problem whenever you talk about sin is that it can all sound condemning and judgemental. Trying to define who is in and who is out. Who is a sinner and who isn't.

Someone once commented that whenever you want to draw lines in order to mark who is outside the kingdom and who is inside, always remember: Jesus is on the other side of the line! Jesus is always with the outsiders, with the sinners.

Paul is discussing sin to make the point that all have sinned and fallen short In chapter two Paul describes how even the Jews, the chosen people, had a direct revelation of God and the law given to Moses, they still reject God and do their own thing and break the law.

Paul makes the claim in chapter 3 verse 23 that although all have sinned God still loves us and offer his grace. So he reaches the conclusion in chapter three:

‘for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus’

The function of sin talk in the bible is not to blame and condemn but to turn us to healing and rescue, to salvation. Blame on the other hand fixes us in condemnation.

The way we often talk about sin is like ripping those words apart: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*, separating it from the next words: *and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*

A biblical meaning of sin is all about how we imagine we stand independently on our own removing ourselves from the warmth of God's love. Putting it back into that context reminds us that we

are creatures, dependent on God for our every breath, interdependent and connected with the whole of the cosmos. It is the consequence of sin that we get separated from God and from ourselves and others and then all our relationships become disordered and disorientated, we lose the capacity to trust and our desires become muddled and misaligned.

Paul in this letter will articulate a gospel where God acts to put things right: 'the righteousness of God is seen at work' as Paul says in chapter 1 vs. 17. The work of Christ, especially on the cross will be given prominence in this letter. Paul will show how God puts us right with God's self. God does this as a gift. The word for God's gift is 'grace'. Grace means gift, abundant gift, undeserved gift, gift that makes everything wrong wondrously right.

God is like a judge who at the last minute gets an appeal against our sentence. The judge not only overturns the sentence but declares us innocent, wipes our conviction off the books, sets us free. But more than that God's grace justifies, makes right, at one or atonement' puts us in a right relationship to God – so we become aware through faith, of God's love for us and we come to realise we are children of God. God is like the parent who welcomes home the child who has wandered far away, not only forgiving and forgetting, but loving and rejoicing: arms always open, heart always open. Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Looking at sin can seem very negative and depressing – yet it is important to look at what harms us, in order to turn to what heals us. The British Medical Association has the image of the serpent on the rod – which has connections to the story of Moses being told to hold up the serpent before the Israelites who had been poisoned by its bite and only by looking at it could they be healed. Likewise Jesus would be lifted up on a cross and be the source of healing through faith. Faith is needed to look at the

cross and see the horror of crucifixion and the sin that put Jesus on it and find ourselves healed instead of judged.

We have a taster in these verses of some big themes that will come up again as we go through Romans. Maybe we can already start to make links with our own experience. Perhaps we know that in some way the world is not right, tainted by sin, even our sin. Perhaps we know stories of grace and redemption and the God who is behind those movements.

Ben Hur is just out at the cinemas. Jesus features in the film and his message from the cross of mercy and forgiveness is the pivot of the film that turns Ben Hur against vengeance.

Last year a film came out called Captive which told the amazing story of the woman who was held hostage in her apartment by the man who killed three people in Atlanta's courthouse in 2005, exactly at the time that my family and I were on sabbatical there.. The slayings were done by Brian Nichols and he took Ashley Smith a 33year old widowed mother of a young girl, hostage in her own apartment and tied her up. As the night wore on she tried to win Nichols trust by telling him about her life. Smith told Nichols about her daughter and bonded with him. Her husband died four years ago after having been stabbed and she told Nichols that if he hurt her, her little girl wouldn't have a mommy or a daddy. He eventually untied her and some of the fear lessened as they talked.

'You're here in my apartment for some reason' she told him, saying that he may be destined to be caught and to spread the word of God's grace to fellow prisoners. She had been reading a Christian book the Purpose Driven Life, which used a lot of Romans and which was a bestseller across the USA. She had become convinced that God loved even the worst offender and still had a purpose for them.

Nichols told her she was his angel, sent from God.

When morning came he was overwhelmed when Ashley Smith made him pancakes for breakfast. He had never been shown such kindness before. They watched the morning TV News and the reports of the courthouse slayings. Smith confronted him with what he had done, telling him that it had been wrong and that he had to face justice. Nichols finally let Smith go knowing that she would call the police: which she did. When the police surrounded the apartment Nichols gave himself up peacefully, waving a white towel in surrender.

Smith was declared the hero in the story. She had confronted a killer with his crime and the need for justice. She had still treated him humanely and offered him transforming grace that offered a way for redemption.

Sin, redemption, grace, faith, peace and the power of the gospel for all. Some of the landmarks we see as we look at our map of Romans. And perhaps some of the real human experiences in our lives too. There will be more to come as we continue our look at Romans in the coming weeks.