30th October 2016

Romans 9-11

God's Sovereign Choice

This time next week 22 of us will be on a boat in the Sea of Galilee having morning worship. Our Holy Land Pilgrimage will be under way as we re-trace the places where Jesus walked and taught and healed, where he suffered and died and rose again and commissioned his disciples. Israel is an amazing country and I'm sure the party is in for quite an experience. As we reflect on those events 2000 years ago we will also be aware of the current events in the present. Israel and Palestine is arguably at the heart of global politics. What happens in that region has repercussions around the world. What happens in the US Presidential election that will take place while we are out there will have repercussions on Israel and Palestine and the region. I'm sure the group will appreciate a personal insight into the state of Israel and Palestine.

As we continue our look at Paul's letter to the Romans we cover three chapters 9-11 in which Paul too considers the

people of Israel – God's chosen nation. Because of Jesus and the gospel of grace that Paul proclaims membership of God's people is now open to all by faith not by race. Does this mean that God has rejected his former chosen people? Has God gone back on his word? Why has the majority of Jews rejected Jesus? Can they be saved without him? What does this mean for other religions who do not accept Jesus as Lord?

The issue of multiculturalism and the relationships between different faiths is a hot issue at the moment. A common modern reaction to religion has been to assume it is all the same. All faiths are of equal value. Everyone must follow their own idea of God, must find their own type of faith and must be left to their own devices in doing so.

In a university common room, a professor was having a go at the Christian faith. He said to a theology lecturer, 'let's face it, basically all religions are the same, aren't they? I mean, what they all boil down to is the Golden Rule: treat other people as you'd like them to treat you'.

'I suppose that's one way of looking at it,' replied the theologian. 'Just as in astronomy it all boils down to one thing, really: 'twinkle twinkle, little star'

With the prevalence of religiously inspired violence I think people are actually coming to the realization that not all beliefs are healthy and life-giving and that not all lifestyles are equally honouring to ourselves as human beings, let alone to God in whose image we are made.

Some discernment is needed. How you discern, what values you use will expose your own 'faith'. Of course for the secularist all religion is a human construction and built on a mistake for there is no God, no sacred. The absolutist, the fundamentalist goes to the other extreme and believe they, and they only have the truth. Who is right? Who is wrong? And what does the future hold for people of different faiths and those who have no faith except the secular sort? Putting it crudely – if you don't believe in Christ are you lost?

Remember the context of this letter. Paul is writing to a church in Rome that was originally made up of Jewish Christians, but when the Jews were expelled from Rome

by Emperor Claudius in the mid 40 AD the church became full of only Gentile believers. Now the Jews are allowed back into Rome and there is friction between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul is writing the letter to bring the two groups together by arguing that all have sinned, all have received grace, all share in a common hope.

In Romans 9 Paul turns to the 'problem' of Israel: what has become of God's covenant people, the Jews, and what has become of God's promises to them?

These questions are by no means academic for Paul. This issue is pressing and important for Paul; and the cause of heartfelt anguish. He says 'For *I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race,* ⁴ the people of Israel.' (Verses 1-3). Would you be prepared to be damned for the sake of others?

Through the varied and difficult arguments of the next three chapters Paul wrestles to hold together his convictions that God has acted in Christ to save both Jew and Gentile and that Israel's gifts and calling are irrevocable. He sees in the announcement of the gospel to the Gentiles a part of the grand divine plan which will in turn lead to the salvation of all Israel and ultimately all people (11 vs32). In the end though he confesses it a mystery, Paul cannot believe that God will abandon his people the Jews. While it is a struggle for Paul to make sense of all this, at least he struggles with the tension, refusing to resolve it by abandoning his conviction about God's steadfastness towards Israel.

Let's go through these three chapters, admittedly because of time restrictions with some haste, so I can draw out Paul's main arguments and offer some application to our own lives. (You may wish to open your bibles and follow me!) There is a study night on Romans Wednesday 23rd Nov if you want to follow up some of these issues.

1. God Chooses

Paul goes back to Abraham to explain God's plan and promises. God's word cannot be wrong. God from the beginning worked His purposes out by choosing one family from the human race and continues to choose right down to Jesus.

Choosing is always hard. I remember my school days and lining up against the wall to be chosen for the football teams. Two captains would take turns picking and they

naturally chose the best players first. I was inevitably in the last batch to be picked, often in that dismissive catch all phrase: 'you can have the rest'.

Being a chosen people can lead to a sense of entitlement even arrogance. It is an accusation constantly laid against the Jews and certainly there are groups within the State of Israel who believe they have a God given mandates to take land and holy sites and do so aggressively and without recourse to the law.

The use of Old Testament characters in Paul's argument will remind his listeners that the principle of selection is done without regard for the moral character of people chosen. God's choice is without favouritism or injustice. God has chosen for a reason and a responsibility. The Jews were chosen to a light to the Gentiles.

Paul lists Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah in this section. All of them had their failings and moral faults. It doesn't mean that God can't use you nor has a purpose for your lives. It is not because you are good, it's because you are chosen by God that counts. Some people say I have failed, I have brought shame on myself, and I'm not good enough. Read your bible and look at the people God used.

None of them were saints. God used and continues to use individuals that often turn out to be unfaithful, failing to understand and failing to trust yet God acts mercifully with them. God's power is such that no failure, however desperate, can thwart God's redemptive plan. No human action can override the sovereignty of God.

This is a radical and complex proposal; however it speaks to the heart of Paul's theology in Romans. God, who has been gracious, can be trusted to be gracious, even to the Jews.

It is hard for us in Britain to understand how anybody would vote for Donald Trump. But Americans will vote for him despite his character because his party stands for certain principles such as pro-life and anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, same sex marriage, low taxes and little state interference. It is always a dilemma – do you vote for the person or the party? Does character matter?

From a gospel perspective you would say yes character matters supremely, but you would also add that God can still work through our flaws and failings.

2. God is God

God is sovereign in his choice as Paul illustrates in his next comparison:

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?"'[h] ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

We are like clay and God is a potter. Clay can be recalcitrant, yet God's purposes must go forward whether or not the clay responds. God will do with Israel what he did with Pharaoh and work through their rebellion to a more glorious work. Paul establishes the right of God to remould Israel.

We must always remember that God is God. We can't tell God what to do. It would be like the clay telling the potter how to do his job. Faith is trusting that God will do right and leaving it in God's hands – to deploy again that vivid image of a potter and clay.

In this section Paul is emphasising God's election, sovereignty, plan and purpose. The theological name for all this is predestination. This is not predeterminism or fatalism. Predestination speaks of God foreordaining the final outcome of all. Predeterminism is the conviction that every event is already predetermined, eliminating choice or freewill. As with a journey, predestination holds that God knows the journey's end, but predeterminism holds that God controls every turn or stop along the way. The bible tells repeatedly of people who have been called by God yet who are free to fail, to be unfaithful to God, fail to understand, fail to trust, yet God acts with mercy towards them. God's power is such that no failure, however desperate, can thwart God's plan. No human action can override the sovereignty of God. That should give us both freedom and assurance to live and work for God's purposes. What we do matters, but it is not all down to us.

3. God's Plan for Israel

Paul then uses different images to describe the place of the Jews in God's purposes. In the image of a remnant, Israel would be cut down to size in order to rebuild more fruitfully. He draws on the image of a stumbling stone to explain that Israel has failed to accept Jesus as Messiah,

they have tripped up. Faith marks out the members of the true Israel – this is the one and only true badge of membership. Membership in God's covenant family is by faith alone – so Gentiles now counted in. Jews been using the law as badge of membership which is why they have tripped up. The Messiah is the fulfilment of the law.

In chapter 11 Paul argues that Gentiles have been grafted onto the branch of faith but they shouldn't make themselves more superior to the other branches. God is both kind and severe (11vs22) pruning the vine so it can be more fruitful, being steadfast against sin and evil, yet also kind in grafting on other branches.

Paul talks about a divine secret – how the Jews were hardened against the gospel so that the Gentiles may believe. Paul hopes that this will make the Jews embarrassed, even envious and they too will turn and accept Jesus as the Messiah. It is a great motive in evangelism. The number of people who come to faith when they see the difference Jesus Christ makes to someone's life. It is attractive: I want what you have got!

He reiterates in verse 32 that in shutting all mankind in the prison of disobedience, God's purpose was to show mercy to all mankind. He ends this section with a hymn of praise to God, wondering how deep God's ways are and looking to the future where from him and through him and to him all things exist.

4. All Israel will be saved

Paul makes a bold claim in 11.26 that all Israel will be saved. He follows that up by claiming that God will have mercy on all people in verse 32:

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Theologians, of course, debate who is included in the term Israel and who is included in 'all'?

It has to be said that Paul's vision has not been fulfilled yet. Whilst there has been many Gentile converts to Christianity the Jews have not been embarrassed by that. Christians and Jews are heirs to Abraham but most Jews do not believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the tie that binds people to Abraham and Abraham's God.

Some Christians still think they can figure out a timetable by which Israel will come overwhelmingly to accept Christ. Other Christians zealously seek to hasten the day by their mission to the Jews. When we were in Israel last year we attended a service in St George's church in Jerusalem which served Messianic Jews, a group of Jewish believers in Christ. It was amazing to see their worship straight out of the synagogue but with Christ at the centre. We also went to a synagogue and were moved by the enthusiastic worship of God there and the devoutness of those Jews.

It still leaves us with the problem? If Christ is the answer to Israel's ancient hopes, why don't more Jews believe in him as Lord? Throughout the centuries Christians have persecuted Jews about this.

Sadly too often we Christians have not stood strongly against those who treat Judaism with contempt and sometimes treat Jews with unimaginable malice. Paul certainly reminds us in this passage that he is still a Jew, Jesus was a Jew and that the Jewish faith is still the root of

our faith in God and that the Jews are still saved by the grace of God just as Christians and Gentiles are.

Islam of course has arisen since Paul's time (approximately six hundred years later) and also claims its faith inheritance from Abraham and embraces a lot of Christian and Jewish belief. Together these three major religions are the people of the book and the children of Abraham. But what of the Eastern religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucism? What about all those in our culture that are just not interested in religion never mind Christianity? One could go on? Will all be saved?

It is difficult to guess where Paul would stand in his understanding of twenty first century Judaism and its relationship to Christian churches. Equally difficult would it be to guess what his attitude to other religions would be.

I would imagine he would still want to stress the revelation we have of God's grace through the work of Christ. He calls people to faith in chapter 10 by saying if the confession 'Jesus is Lord' is on your lips and the faith

that God raised him from the dead is in your heart, you will find salvation.

For Paul it is vital that we preach the gospel. Faith comes by hearing. How can they hear unless they are told? It is vital that we call people to personal trust and faith in Jesus Christ. Maybe you haven't made that public confession of faith yet. What is stopping you? Only when you become intentional and serous about your faith does your faith become meaningful and real. The word saved is a rich word which also means wholeness, healed, having a rich full peaceful life. Heart, mouth, inward and outward confession belong together. Confession without faith would be vain. Faith without confession would be spurious.

But Jesus points us to God. The God we see in Christ is one who sought the good of all regardless of background and lifestyle, who was inclusive to all sections of society. His life, what he did, how he treated people, his death and resurrection are all hard facts that for Paul illustrate what God is like, what God's attitude to us is. Paul wants us to

share that with others because it changes people's lives for the better.

Paul has argued throughout this letter that the world is in a mess. All have sinned – all deserve judgment. Yet he has passionately shown how Christ has made it possible that all will be shown mercy. God is gracious. As in Adam all die so in Christ shall all be made alive. God is God, whose promises are unfailing. In all things God works for good. It is God's intent that nothing can separate us from God's love. That from God, through God and to God all things shall find their purpose and their blessing. God will accomplish that, in God's time and in God's way.

Just after saying that all who confess Jesus as Lord will be saved he then suggests that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Whether the Lord in question is Jesus or God is not clear. What is clear is that Paul is using a quote from an Old Testament prophet who did not know about Jesus and whose Lord was God himself. Does Paul advocate an inclusive understanding of God's grace? That

God's grace and mercy is so deep and wide as to include individuals who do not meet our standards.

In his sermon 'on faith' John Wesley argued for the need for faith in God in order to be saved – but affirmed that this faith need not be explicitly Christian in character. The advantage of the Christian faith for Wesley were twofold. We knew we were sons and daughters of God not mere servants and secondly we had a full assurance of salvation through Christ and did not have to depend on our good deeds and religious practices. A similar position was advocated by CS Lewis who argued in Mere Christianity that those who commit themselves to the pursuit of goodness and truth will be saved even if they have no formal knowledge of Christ.

Whilst Paul continues to maintain the tension between God's judgment and resolute opposition to sin and evil, the trump card, the deciding attribute is mercy and grace. John Robinson considered the nature of the love of God and imagined a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain themselves from free and grateful

surrender? In the end love will conquer all, making the existence of hell an impossibility. In a universe governed by love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors.

Is this an insight into Paul's hope that nothing can separate us from the love of God? Paul's optimistic belief that God's plan and purpose for the salvation of all and the recreation of the whole cosmos will come about in the end? There are no easy answers and perhaps as Paul has suggested at the start of chapter 9 all of this has to be rooted in a way of praying that is rooted in love and grief

for the world around us so we can ponder these things

more deeply and learn fresh wisdom.

Once Israel arrogantly assumed it was the sole repository of God's mercy and blessing. Paul warns the Gentiles against such arrogance at the end of his olive tree analogy. The danger of arrogance, which was a temptation for Jews and Gentiles Christians alike, can seep into our churches today

What is clear is that one shouldn't procrastinate now, nor leave it to chance or fine philosophising when the word is near you? Have faith now! Know the benefits of being in Christ now!

And church – how will others hear unless someone tells them!