

Proper 8 Year A 2020

Romans 6 12-23

Oh dear! I seem to have made a rod for my own back by saying we should look at the Letter to the Romans as a complete text rather than look at snippets week by week (Sunday by Sunday). I'm actually reading Romans every morning as part of the set readings for Morning Prayer, but it is going to take me about six weeks to get through it.

This week's 'Sermon' could quite easily end up being my offering to Highers Students in Biblical Studies or even something wider – do they do Highers in Sacred Texts or Comparative Religion? I don't know.

So I don't want to get into detailed examination of the reading we have before us and what it says to us today; perhaps we should start by thinking about what it said to the people to whom it was written, and what it tells us about the person who wrote it; no-one seems to suggest that the author of this letter was not St Paul, even though several other of 'his' letters are contested.

So, who was Paul, and who were 'the Romans'? We know not a lot about Paul, a few things from his letters and some things from St Luke's Acts of the Apostles. He was a Pharisee, and educated, probably by 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestinian standards a quite

wealthy Jew – he certainly had enough resources to be able to travel around the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, practicing his skilled occupation as a tent maker with no family to worry about. He was a passionate man – passionate in his desire to destroy the earliest followers of Jesus as Messiah – holding the coats of the men who stoned St Stephen to death – and then, after his Damascus Road experience and conversion – passionate to tell people that Jesus was the Messiah they had all waited for, and, not only that, that Jesus had come to save not only Jews but also Gentiles; to save them all from 'slavery to sin'.

So that is Paul – but what about 'the Romans'? Who do you think they were? Paul had never met them. He sends his beloved friend Phoebe, a deacon in the Greek church, to deliver his letter to them – perhaps she was going to Rome on business and he thought he could entrust his letter to her, who knows? He is planning to follow her to Rome, after a visit to Jerusalem, before going on to Spain. That never happened. But to whom was he writing? It appears (according to social anthropologists) that he was writing to a group of small house churches (although they might have met in workshops, stables, under bridges, not homes), - certainly not an organised 'church' with structure and hierarchy, that would only come much later. They were people

who had heard about Jesus – how they heard is unclear – they were people who gathered together to hear the story of Jesus, to break bread together, and to think and pray about their lives, to baptise and be baptised, by whom again we don't know, but Paul talks of them moving from death to life, certainly a baptismal reference. These people would have been predominantly – well, I was going to say 'working class', but I don't think you can use that expression about 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome. You were either 'elite', 'destitute', 'almost destitute' or 'just above destitute, but worrying about it', and only about 1% of the population were 'elite' in economic terms. So the idea we have of rich people opening the doors of their homes to the rag, tag and bobtail of society in a generous Christian show of solidarity, so that they could worship together seems to be far from reality. And were these people Gentiles or Jews? First Century Rome was not a good place to be if you were Jewish; an Imperial Edict had expelled all Jews from Rome in 50AD, and Paul was writing only ten years later, when Jews had begun to move back to the city. So Paul's long discussion about the place of 'Israel' in God's plan for the future needs to be set in that context.

Oh, dear. This is beginning to sound like a lecture, not a sermon.

But if you imagine you are a slave, or a 'freed slave' (there were plenty of them – when you became too old, ill or injured to be of economic use to your slave master, you were 'freed' – thrown out on the street to fend for yourself) , if you were Roman but not formally a 'Citizen', and then you decided to join this new religion, which had its roots in Judaism and as its 'Lord' a man who had been executed by the Roman authorities, then what would you make of Paul's letter about 'sin' and 'salvation', about the place of Israel in God's plan, about the concept of 'justification'? The word that springs to mind for me is **hope**. In this life which means in the main trying to get by every day, labouring or begging, with only the desire to get through until tomorrow, Jesus offered **hope**. And Paul tells them (Ch.5) that their 'suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. He could perhaps have written 'You might be suffering now but hang on in there – look what lies ahead – eternal life with God' – perhaps what most African slaves in the south of America and the West Indies felt – you can kick us around but you can't take away our eternal future'. Swing low, sweet chariot!

Two motifs run through this Letter which 21<sup>st</sup> Century European Christians might struggle with – slavery and military might. Slaves and soldiers were facts of life in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome. About one third of the population would have been slaves, and soldiers were everywhere. The city, the State, the Empire needed slaves and soldiers. In today's text Paul exhorts those listening to his letter being read, perhaps by Phoebe, not to let sin dominate their bodies, because they have been brought from death to life (*i.e.* baptized) and so are 'under grace' and slaves of righteousness. As in last Sunday's Gospel reading, this is about commitment – and Paul expresses that in terms of a military battle – 'No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness . . . (but) as instruments of righteousness'. These words are sometime misconstrued as instructions about sexual behaviour, but Paul has a greater vision than that – the word we have as 'instruments' meant 'weapons, armour, shield, battle dress'. We are at war – at war against sinfulness, at war against sin's running mate, death. In today's world that could mean we need to use our 'instruments', our weapons, in the battle against poverty, racism, all forms of inequality and exploitation – indeed, anything which stands in the way of God's will for His world.

We could look at the world around us and despair, thinking 'Why doesn't God do something about that?' Paul tells us over and over again in this letter to the scattered Christians in Rome – God has done something – He sent his Son so that all who believe in Him may have eternal life – and He holds out an invitation. Will you become slaves to my will and fight my battle for righteousness?

I have signed up. I don't always get it right and sometimes I take the easy way out. But I know I am 'under grace', and every time I get it wrong, that grace allows me to start again.

How about you?