

LETTER TO THE ROMANS

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH & ITS POWER TO TRANSFORM

Paul's letter to the Romans is not a general account of the Christian belief and practice. Its contents are determined by Paul's future arrangements. He has finished his missionary work in the Eastern Mediterranean regions and now he plans to move to the West (Rom.15:19). Faith in Jesus Christ has been the driving force of his life. That is what he will preach in Spain. The letter is an extended account of the importance of this faith, its transforming impact and the equality of Jew and Gentile in the Christian People of God.

Paul's Purpose in Writing

Romans is an affable letter written in Corinth in 57/58 CE, in which he outlined his plans for the future. He looks forward to coming to Rome but he must first travel to Jerusalem to bring funds to the struggling Christian community there (Rom.15:25-6). Paul hopes that Rome will be the launching pad for his next travels. Evidently, Paul's efforts to establish his credentials and build friendly relationships with the Roman Churches has to do with his planned mission to Spain. His words are clear. "*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*" (Rom.15:24). He expects to get some support from the churches in Rome. Rome was ideally placed to have some responsibility for the Spanish adventure since Spain was only four days away by sea.

The Situation in Rome

Paul has weighed up the situation and his introduction to the letter is appropriate to the occasion. He clearly states his apostolic authority but he also mollifies the Roman community by acknowledging their good repute. He notes that he is not coming in a high-handed manner. He has as much to receive from them as they from him (Rom 1:11-12). When Paul decided to visit the Roman Christians, he knew that he was walking into a situation that was far from easy. His friends, the husband and wife team, Aquila and Priscilla, would have filled him in. Several years before, Paul met both of them when he arrived in Corinth. According to Acts 18:2, they had "*recently come from Italy...because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.*" This happened in 49 CE and is attested to by the Roman author Suetonius in his work: "He expelled the Jews from Rome because they were rioting, excited by Chrestus" (*Life of Claudius XXV*). It is generally assumed that Acts and Suetonius are discussing the same incident and that the Chrestus in question was Christ. Controversy on belief in Christ split the congregations in the Jewish synagogues in Rome. These arguments spilled over into street rioting and were serious enough for the emperor, Claudius, to command expulsions. He hardly expelled every

Jew but a police sweep would have netted prominent individuals and targeted specific synagogues.

Both Jews and Christians had suffered from the unwelcome attention of Claudius and would hardly want a recurrence. Moderate Christians in Rome might feel that a Pauline visit was adding fuel to fire. After all, trouble involving Jews, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians had followed Paul from city to city. Jewish Christians might mistrust him and Jews would label him as a traitor to their faith and traditions.

The choice of Spain for his final mission would have had a certain logic for Paul. He was conscious that his mission was to reach beyond all boundaries of place and peoples. For his contemporaries Spain was at the limit of the known world. When coming to a new locality, Paul's policy was to preach at the local synagogue and have a base of Jewish converts. At that time, a Jewish presence did not exist in Spain and the languages were different. Paul knew he would need the support of the Roman churches which would be familiar with the local situation. With this in mind, Paul appends an extended greeting at the end of the Letter (Romans 16) in which he sends greetings to twenty six individuals and several house churches. His intention here was clearly strategic and sought to give him status in the Roman community. He demonstrates a close relationship with some of those he mentions, confident that they could vouch for him, and he mentions a number of house churches he is familiar with in the Roman capital.

The Gospel and Sin.

Within Paul's vision of the world, two opposing agencies are at work seeking to rescue or destroy the happiness of men and women, whether they be Jew or Gentile. On the one side there is the Good News which has captivated Paul and shaped his life. What it is and its presence in his own life is forcefully stated in the introductory section of the Letter to the Romans which concludes with the statement. "*It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*" (Rom.1:16).

In opposition to God is a dark, impersonal agency which Paul calls 'Sin'. Sin is more than the individual misdemeanours of individuals. It is a lethal force bred in history and at loose in the world of men and women. It is a blind corrosive darkness, built up over time, infecting the whole of society, hiding in the crannies of life malevolently waiting for a chance to destroy. In several passages in the letter to the Romans sin is personified: "Just as Sin came into the world"(Rom 5:12); "that we might no longer be slaved to Sin" (Rom 6:6); "for the wages of Sin is death" (Rom.6:23). In a dramatic passage, Paul describes his individual helplessness before the power of Sin which twists and distorts his life. "*But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me*" (Rom.7:17).

The Law of Moses and the Law of Nature.

In the mind of Paul, the human world was divided between the Gentiles and the Jews. Following different paths, they were both called to centre their lives on God in praise and thanksgiving. All were made in the image of God; all were called to be stewards of God rather than servants of

the world. In their different ways both had inverted the order of things. The Jews served human endeavour (the observance of the Law) while the Pagans served the world (in the worship of idols).

In Deuteronomy, the divine action which instituted the covenant is described as an act of election. "*For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth*" (Deut.14:2). The fact that this verse is repeated in Deut.7:6 underlines the importance of the idea for the author. The nation of Israel as a whole is elected and this election is not a human achievement but rather a gift of God. "*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt*" (Deut.7:7-8). The Book of Deuteronomy is a central text in Jewish thought and within it, the sheer gratuitousness of the divine election and promise is clearly evident.

The gift of election was never denied. However, the Jews found it difficult to navigate the relationship between divine action and human response. The Law of Moses regulated this response. If condemnation follows on disobedience to the Law, it was easy to conclude that meritorious obedience brought salvation. The next step followed quickly. The key to life is human merit and suddenly the act of gratuitous divine election was sidelined. Since the Jews found it impossible to observe all the complex niceties of the Law of Moses, a gift which was designed to give life became an instrument of death (Rom 7:10).

On the other hand, the pagan gentiles had their own natural law. It was engraved in their hearts (Rom 2:14-15). It is not as if they had been left without information. The wonder of creation itself can only suggest the reality of an "*eternal power and deity*" (Rom 1:20). Paul accuses the pagans of suppressing the truth: "*They exchanged the truth about God for a lie*" (Rom 1:18); they have "*not seen fit to acknowledge God*" (Rom 1:25). This inversion of the divine order is seen in the worship of idols made of wood and stone and mineral. They serve material things which were designed to serve them (Rom 1:23): they have "*worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" (Rom 1:25). This topsy-turvy version of reality brings chaos in their moral (Rom 1:24, 26-7) and social lives (Rom 1:29-30).

Death is the only outcome of all this. The oppressive power of Sin blighted the efforts of both Jew and Gentile. For the Jew, the Law clarified the range of sinful behaviour but it gave no help to live the law. Gentiles awareness of right and wrong gave no help to moral living. Left to their own designs, they both were helplessly trapped in sinfulness.

The Christian Life.

At the heart of Christianity lies the event of Jesus Christ. In Christ, the inwardness and self-centredness of sin is replaced by life/love. For Paul Jesus is the very antithesis of sin. He writes simply: "*For Christ did not please himself*" (Rom15:3). This does not refer to any single happening or event in Jesus' life but rather reflects the pattern of life of the one who said "*He*

who loses his life, finds it" (Mk 8:35). This self-giving of Christ finds its climax on the cross. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul describes the dynamic of the situation with telling effect. Christ did not cling to his 'equality with God' (Phil 2:6). He joined the lowest level of the social pyramid, 'taking the form of a slave' (Phil 2:7) and died a shameful and agonizing death (Phil 2:8). For the Philippians, the call was to identify themselves with Christ and to allow his mindset to well up within them, "*Make your own the mind of Christ*" (Phil 2:5). Such sentiments are also echoed in Paul's earlier letter to the Galatians "*I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me*" (Gal 2:20).

Behind it all is the story of love. God loves us and Christ died for us. The intensity of that love becomes clear when Paul outlines the circumstances in which we might be prepared to die for another. If the other were a really good person, we might die for him. However, Christ died for the ungodly and evil. "*Christ died for us while we were yet sinners*" (Rom 5:8).

It is faith and not works that opens us to that love. When we believe, when we trust in that love of God revealed in Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit floods us with the energy to respond to that love: "*The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*" (Rom 5:5)

Having discussed the slavery to sin engendered by the law (Rom 7:7-25), Paul moves to a lyrical presentation of the new age of freedom through the gift of the Spirit in Romans 8. At the heart of it are words which seem to have their context in the communal prayer of the early communities: "*..you received the Spirit of adoption which enables us to cry out, 'Abba, Father'*" (Rom 8:15).. The Letter to the Galatians which in many ways is quite like Romans, has a similar text. . "*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father'*" (Gal 4:6). In this situation, the sense of liberty and freedom seems to be striking home. They are no longer slaves but adopted daughters and sons of God, fellow heirs with Christ and in the excitement of that discovery they cry out with Jesus' own word, *Abba* (Mk14:36). It is generally accepted that the term *Abba* was used in intimate family circumstances: it was the language in which children, and adults, addressed their fathers – a word of courtesy and respect, intimacy and trust. The chapter ends with a song to God's love made known to us in Christ Jesus (Rom 8: 35-39).

This results in a transformed life which involves living within time of resurrection values. In Paul's understanding of Baptism, the process of going down and rising from the water ties the Christian into the events of Christ's death and resurrection. Here and now the baptized Christian is living the resurrected life and a sturdy and robust program of ethical living is an expression of that life (Rom. 6:1-14; Col.3:1-4). Paul is realistic enough to admit that we still retain our pesky human partiality for wrong doing..."*you are still weak, human beings*" (Rom 6:19). Nevertheless, agendas for justice, holiness of life, and energies for mission are implanted in us by the resurrection reality which here and now is our inner core experience. This is the clear implication of 1Cor 6:14. However, we are not on our own and dependent on ourselves alone. Powers of the resurrection here and now shape the way we live and liberate us so that we might confront all that is unjust and immoral.

In the Letter to the Romans, the one redemptive process works in both creation and Christians. Paul makes clear that the universe itself features in the salvation history of the sons and

daughters of God. Creation waits with longing the glory that is in store for the believer. Paul's word for longing is translated in various ways that seek to express a heightened sense of expectation: "on tip-toes", "head out thrust", "craning forward" (Rom.8:19). Creation's yearning is met by divine love. In Paul's mind, eschatological transformation is not seen as the outcome of evolution. It is a gift of love which searches out men and women and overcomes the 'principalities' (Rom 8:38), the alienating forces within the universe. Paul describes this aching search for the future in terms of groaning. Non-human creation is groaning (Rom 8:22), men and women "groan inwardly" (Rom 8:23). Even the Spirit within us groans as it shapes our longings for the future (Rom 8:26-27). As the pride and self interest of the old humanity generated chaos, the Spirit shaped prayers of the new humanity bring it in line with the purposes of God. In doing so, the cosmic 'futility' of the fall is overcome. The salvation of the universe is rooted therefore in the salvation of humanity. In accord with this, humanity is not longing for a disembodied immortality but the salvation of its embodied self, "*the redemption of our bodies*" (Rom 8:23).

Greetings for the community at Rome

The final chapter of Romans consists of a list of names. In some cases these are associated with roles in the Church and episodes from the life of Paul. Paul commends Phoebe to the Roman Community. She was probably going to Rome on business and so carried the letter. Some of the names are familiar. The much travelled husband and wife team, Aquila and Prisca are back in Rome. Paul based himself with them during his time in Corinth (Acts 18:2-3) and they travelled with him to Ephesus (Acts 18:24-8). Their home is now a centre of the Christian community in Rome: '*Greet also the church in their house*' (Rom 16:5). From all that we know about the early communities it appears that Christians gathered in designated homes for prayer and community support. These were the cells which made up the Christian community of a particular area.

It is notable that of the twenty six individuals mentioned, nine are women. Even more significant is the fact that when service or labour in the church are mentioned, more than half of the references refer to women. Phoebe is a deacon in the church of Cenchreae, - a port city seven miles from Corinth. The significance and understanding of the offices of deacon, presbyter and bishop evolved in the first centuries of the Church and later developments may not correspond with the understanding of these roles at an earlier period. However, whatever the precise nature of the ministry of deacon at this early stage in the church's development, one thing is clear: Phoebe was clearly a person of importance in her own church. She exercised a leadership position with a recognized and established ministry of service. The fact that the precise nature of that service is not defined or made known to us should in no way detract from the prominent role afforded to women in the first Christian communities. Andronicus and Junia seem to be another husband and wife team. They are described as notable apostles and Christians who were in the ministry before the conversion of Paul (Rom 16:7).

Using the familiar image of the body and the interdependence between its cooperating parts, an idea that he developed more fully in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul extols the harmony that exists in

and among the Roman churches (Rom12:4). Writing as he is to citizens of the capital of the empire, Paul exhorts his listeners to model citizenship (Rom 13:1-7) and urges the peaceful acceptance of different views within the community concerning fasts, feasts and dietary matters (Romans 14).

Christianity and Judaism

At various moments in the letter, Paul agonizes about the position of the Jews. He is clear that God is still faithful to them and has never abandoned them (Rom 11:2). They are still “*well loved*” by God (Rom 11:28). The alienation between Judaism and Christianity is, according to Paul, temporary (Rom 11:25). The truth of their situation is found in the rich depths “of the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom11:23, see also the Vatican Council Document, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, § 4-5).

Perhaps, an answer can be found in a close and exact reading of the actual text of St.Paul. He writes of God reaching into the morass of human sinfulness and forming a community. It is this community made up of Jews and Gentiles that is called, predestined, etc. He is not writing about the individuals which make up the community or the process by which they join it. In other contexts he is clear that the communal life of God is open to all who allow the Spirit to mould them into the mind of Christ and open their hearts to a loving Father who welcomes all into the circle of divine life.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

The doctrine of *justification by faith*, favoured by Paul in his letters to early communities in Galatia and Rome, became a major issue during the Reformation. As always in controversy, positions hardened, became extreme and so caricatured that the opposing groups were not able to hear what the other parties were really saying. The Catholic position that stressed that faith must flow into good works could be interpreted as meaning that good works alone merited salvation. However such an understanding was roundly condemned by Paul in the Letter to the Romans. Luther’s passionate commitment to justification on the other hand could also betray a weakness. God’s justifying action did not really change the sinner. In Luther’s words, the sinner is “simultaneously a righteous person and a sinner”. When the sinner is justified in Christ, a cloak is thrown over his sin. That cloak is the face of Christ which God sees. The sinner remains the same; his justification is extrinsic. This led to the impression that it does not matter how you live as long as you have faith.

The Council of Trent in 1547 sought to make it clear that divine action precedes and supports human effort. Nothing that we do on our own gives us a right to justification, “nothing prior to justification, whether faith or works, truly merits the grace of justification.” For his part, Luther would certainly never have accepted that the moral life is irrelevant to the justified sinner.

In more temperate times, Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians have examined each other’s position and in 1997 produced a joint document stating that there is no substantial

difference in the teachings of both Christian communities on the doctrine of justification by faith.

“According to Lutheran understanding, God justifies sinners in faith alone (sola fide). God himself effects faith as he brings forth such trust by his creative word. Because God's act is a new creation, it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love. In the doctrine of "justification by faith alone," a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one's way of life that necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist. .The Catholic understanding also sees faith as fundamental in justification. For without faith, no justification can take place. Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it. The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace, which makes us children of God. ... This new personal relation to God is grounded totally on God's graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God, who remains true to himself, so that one can rely upon him. Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God.”

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification § 26-27

What does Paul mean by “righteousness?”

Paul describes “*the righteousness of God*” as being apparent to those who have faith (Rom 1:17). In biblical texts, the righteousness of God is basically his ‘uprightness’. He is simply the one who does the right thing because that is the way he is. When Paul uses the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’, effectively he is attending to God’s transforming love and care which he exercises effortlessly because such is his nature and he is always faithful to himself. The ‘righteous’ person is one who is drawn into the sphere of divine care and lives as God wills.

Does Paul believe in “Predestination?”

In Rom 8:28-30, Paul describes the unfolding of God’s intentions from eternity into time. It was not something hastily conceived. It involved foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and finally glorification. It is a text that has preoccupied and been agonized over by Christian thinkers since the time of St. Augustine. Are some individuals selected for heaven, others for damnation and all this antecedent to whatever they may feel or do themselves? In the writings of Calvin, the situation arrived at a chilling clarity.

“By God’s bidding...salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it...He does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what the denies to others”

Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk.111, Ch.21.

Fr Sean O’ Sullivan

Cork & Ross Office of Adult Religious Education