

## Home Retreat Jan 2022 Romans

I promised to reflect on Paul's Letter to the Romans. But I want to start with Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus. This has always had great resonance for me, ever since I passed up and down the 70 km of that road between Damascus and the Israeli frontier in 1965 on my motor-scooter. My companion and I, each on a scooter, had got separated. I had the passports and he had the money as we headed towards Jerusalem for a year of study. After the third time I covered that ground, suddenly there was a cloud of dust in the distance, and we met at the frontier. For Paul the experience on the road to Damascus was the moment when he realized – by divine inspiration – that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel. Privately, I think that Luke's description of Paul's being struck down, repeated three times in the Acts of the Apostles is an exterior account of the event which Paul describes in 2 Cor 12. Luke tells the visible story, Paul himself describes his interior experience in apocalyptic terms. He says he was drawn up into the third heaven and there had an experience which cannot be put into words. It 'cannot' be put into words, not 'may not': it was frankly and simply inexpressible in human language – and I think it was an experience of the Risen Christ.

After that, and a short time in the Jewish Christian community at Antioch, Paul spent the rest of his life frantically travelling around, imparting the Good News to Jews in the Hellenistic cities of first the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, then Greece, imparting it to Jews if they would listen, and otherwise to well-inclined Hellenistic populations. He stayed nowhere long, with the partial exception of a couple of years in Ephesus and eighteen months in Corinth. His stays were short and his instructions rapid. He must have left many gaps, to be only partially filled by his lieutenants like Timothy and Titus. So the communities naturally wrote to tell Paul of their uncertainties and difficulties and puzzles. We have a short dozen of his replies, and there may well have been more.

In our printed Bibles the first to be given is the Letter to the Romans. This is not because it is the most important, but simply because it is the longest. The letters are printed in descending order of length, first letters to communities, then letters to individuals (Timothy, Titus and Philemon). In the readings at Mass we get simple snippets, and I thought it would be valuable to look at Romans (which I think is the most important) as a whole, and see its development of thought. The letter falls into four parts, of which I shall consider only the first three, and of these it is the second part (chapters 4-8) which is most important of all.

However, let us begin with the final chapter, in which he sends good wishes to a lot of individuals, including the hostesses of four house-churches. It was obviously a group of disparate communities who met in different houses around Rome and as such it gives a fascinating glimpse of the Christian community or communities in Rome. Paul wants to stress that he knows a lot of these individuals and greets them all. At

the same time, he is very deferential: Rome was the capital of empire, and Paul is obviously rather in awe of them. He has a tricky message to get across, and wants to make sure that they are on his side. The background of this is complicated: we know from the Acts that a lot of Jews had been expelled from Rome after some sort of disturbance or riot in a synagogue over someone whom (according to the Roman historian Tacitus) they called Chrestus, so probably Christ, which would have been pronounced the same. By the time Paul writes, these expelled Jews have returned, and the situation which confronts Paul is complicated: the non-Jewish Romans had been getting on very nicely, thank you, and were not sure that they wanted to welcome the Jewish Christians back. After all, they were not being saved by observing the Jewish Law. Paul would agree with that, but would still insist that they, the Jewish Christians, were the heirs of Judaism. So he stands in the middle, holding out a hand to each party, the Jewish and the non-Jewish, gentile members of the communities, trying to weld them together again.

So Paul starts off (Part One) with a dreadful catalogue of the sins and blindness of the gentiles – not unlike the sardonic speech he gave in Athens on the Areopagus, complaining of their blindness. When that has gone home, to the discomfiture of the non-Jewish Christians and probably the delight of the Jews, he then turns on the Jews and tells them that they are not much better either. This is summed up at the beginning of chapter three with a string of scripture quotations stressing that the whole natural world is sunk in sin and evil.

Then to show that we have been delivered from this disastrous situation, Paul gives the first of two explanations of the work of Christ. This he gives in ritual Jewish terms of a sacrifice for sin. But note carefully, this is not the saving work of man. No, it is God who reconciles; it is God who does the reconciling, bringing humanity back to himself. It is not man placating an angry god, but God puts forward Christ as a reconciliation (in Greek *ιλαστηριον*), the same word as is used for the little gold platform on top of the Ark, where the most merciful and loving God resides. Christ as God is the agent of divine reconciliation, God's instrument in bringing human beings back to himself. Why the blood? In Judaism there is no reconciliation or cleansing without blood, for blood is the bearer of life, and the blood of Christ gives new life and a new covenant, just as the annual sacrifice sprinkled half on the altar (representing God) and half on the people on the Jewish Day of Reconciliation cleanses and renews their life in the covenant.

How does that affect us? This is all an expression of faith, the faith of Abraham. So Paul spends a whole chapter (4) reflecting on the faith of Abraham who trusted in God, and this put him right with God. Paul needs to stress that it was not by any observance of the Law that Abraham stood right with God – for the Law and its prescription of circumcision came only four hundred years after the promise – but by his faith and his trust.

Then Paul passes on to what seems to me a far deeper and more meaningful analysis of what Christ has done for us. This is not in ritual terms but in real, human terms.

The evil in which humanity was cut off from God comes from Adam's disobedience. Paul expresses this in historical terms: it comes from Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, passed on through the generations. However, we now know that the Genesis account is not a historical account; this story is an analysis of the whole human situation, a state of constant disobedience and failure. This disobedience of Adam (that is, of humanity) is remedied by the obedience of Christ, the Second Adam (Rom 5.18-20):

As one man's offence brought condemnation to all, so one man's good act has brought justification and life to all. Just as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience are many to be made righteous.

It is not by one man's death, by the gory bloodshed itself, that we are saved, but by Christ's loving obedience unto death.

How does this impact on me? How does Christ's death and resurrection come to me? The answer is given in the next chapter, on baptism and the new life in Christ. The Greek βαπτίζω really means to dip: by baptism we are dipped into Christ's death, and arise dripping or sodden with his new, risen life:

Do you not realize that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? So by baptism we who were baptized into his death were buried with him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, so we too should live in newness of life. (6.3-4)

Baptism is the expression of faith in Christ, the expression of dying with Christ, so of joining him in his death and in his new life, of sharing his risen life. The reality of this new life in Christ is expressed by a whole raft of new words which Paul forms to express the sharing of life with Christ. In English we have some words like 'synthetic' (fabric formed by putting two fabrics together), 'synchronized' (putting two time-pieces together or two parallel activities). Paul forms a whole raft of these to show how we now share our existence with Christ: συνταφεντες/ con-buried with, συνσταυρομαι/ I am con-crucified with. Of these the strongest seems to me συμμορφοι/sharing the form with; this word is used of two trees which have inter-grown. like ivy grown into a tree. Christ's history is now my history, and my history is now Christ's.

There are still two more steps to be taken in this central part of the letter about salvation in Christ. The first (in chapter 7) concerns the Law, the Jewish Law which was so important to those listeners who originated in Judaism and had considered it the way to salvation. First Paul takes the analogy of human law, in the marriage covenant: after the death of one party, this law is no longer active, and once the Christian has died and risen with Christ's new life, the Law itself has no validity. It did, indeed, have a temporary and provisional value in showing me what was wrong with the sinful way of life. In the earlier Letter to the Galatians Paul had used the analogy of a child being led to school by a child-minder or tutor: the function of the Law was precisely this, to show the need of education and improvement, to lead us to

Christ. Paul also introduces the distinction between the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. In Christ we take on the life of the Spirit. 'The flesh' is not merely fleshly, carnal, physical evils such as sexual deviation, drunkenness, physical violence. In his list of fleshly evils Paul includes rivalry, jealousy, malice, whereas the fruit of the Spirit is joy, peace, patience, kindness, which have also a physical side (Galatians 5.20-24).

Then occurs a comforting but somewhat puzzling passage about the struggle to live according to God's law (small letter for 'law' – Paul loves using the same word in different senses). He here dramatizes, and it is unclear whether he is talking about himself or about the human race or about Judaism. Is it Paul speaking or humanity, or the Jew?

The law is spiritual but I am of the flesh. I do not understand my own behaviour, I do not do what I want to do, but I do the thing that I hate. In my inmost self I delight in God's law, but I find in my body another law, battling against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin which persists in my members. (7.14-23)

Paul is well aware that even in the new life of Christ there are instincts which war against the Spirit, whether we call them 'natural' instincts, or original sin, but anyway the tendency to fail, to choose the more immediately attractive good (staying in bed, over-eating) above the ultimately more satisfying work of the Spirit. We have been incorporated into Christ, yes, but there are still pulls in the opposite direction.

This launches us into the final chapter in this part of the letter, on the Spirit. Different writings of the New Testament put different emphases on the Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ. So in the final discourse in the Gospel of John Jesus stresses four times that he will send the Paraclete as his Advocate. This Paraclete, the Spirit, will guide his disciples into all truth, into a full understanding of the truth. Paul himself, in his First Corinthians stresses how the Spirit empowers Christians to work as members of the Body of Christ which is the Church, each as a different limb with a different ability and purpose, apostles, teachers, prophets, healers and so on.

In this chapter 8 of Romans he speaks more about the interior presence of the Spirit. By the Spirit of adoption we can cry out, 'Abba, Father', 'and if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory.' This is the transformation worked by the expression of faith in baptism, our incorporation into Christ. This issues in a splendid rhetorical affirmation of our union with Christ:

I am convinced that neither death nor life,  
nor angels nor rulers,  
nothing already in existence, nothing still to come,  
nor any power nor height nor depths nor any other created thing  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So much for the positive side. And then Paul launches into his tortured questioning, what he calls ‘the unremitting agony’ in his heart: what about the Jews, his kindred in the flesh? In this final three chapters of the first and doctrinal part of the letter he agonises about them. Some have regarded this as a sort of appendix to his exposition of salvation in Christ. Others – and I think I agree more with them – see it as the climax of the letter, to which all the rest is leading up. What of the Jews who refused to believe? In chapters 9 to 11, by one text after another Paul shows that it was bound to happen, that it is merely the next step in the history of the infidelity and rebellion of Judaism, which has happened throughout the bible-story. His principal text is Isaiah 6.9, which is also quoted in all the gospels, explaining why Jesus spoke in parables

Go and say to this people, ‘listen and listen but do not understand  
look and look but do not perceive  
or they will change their ways and be healed’.

Paul tries every way to get out of this impasse. He even tries the idea of grafting new branches on the vine which is Israel. The gentiles are the new branches, but in the end the old branches will be grafted in as well. However I think he sees that this will not work: you can’t graft in branches which are already dead. So in the end he leaves the puzzle to the mercy of God with another rhetorical appeal:

God has imprisoned all human beings in disobedience to show mercy to all.  
How deep are the riches and wisdom of God!  
How unfathomable are his judgments and untraceable his ways!  
Who has ever known the mind of the Lord?  
Who has been his adviser?  
From him and through him and to him are all things  
And to him be glory for ever.

After this triumphant statement of God’s love Paul goes on to the second half of the Letter, in which he treats of moral questions and Christian behavior. But I see these early chapters of Romans as Paul’s principal explanation of how we are saved by Christ, that is, by being dipped into his death and rising with him in his resurrection.

### **1. Human condition of sin**

The gentiles  
The Jews  
All the world – proved by scripture

### **2. God’s rescue plan**

Cultic solution: Christ as sacrifice of reconciliation  
The faith of Abraham  
The obedience of Christ, the second Adam

### **3. The Christian**

Baptized into Christ  
New Life  
Struggle: flesh versus spirit  
Filled with the Spirit

#### **4. The fate of Israel**