

Sunday 27 August 2023
St. Margaret's – Holy Communion
Trinity 12

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

For some weeks now the Lectionary has had us looking at Paul's letter to the Roman church and will continue to do so for a few weeks yet. Most recently we've been looking at chapters 9-11 and these have largely been Paul's attempt to give some kind of coherent shape to God's activity in choosing, first Israel, and then everyone who believes in and through Christ.

All of which leads Paul to start today's passage with the word "Therefore". Use of this word "therefore" points us back to chapters 9 to 11 of his letter to the Romans where Paul has been exploring the basic elements of God's relationship with humanity. That's to say, on the one hand, God's perpetual call to us to experience life in all its fullness, and on the other, our resistance to that call, and the way for us humans to find our way back to our God who always wants nothing less than that fullness of life for each and everyone of us.

But, this week, we find Paul takes a slightly different tack. Here we have Paul giving some plain and simple, everyday advice to the Christian community in Rome dealing with practical questions of how we live out the faith he has spelt out.

But this isn't a complete break from all that went before. There is a logical progression from what Paul has been discussing in the previous chapters to what now seems to be just a straightforward presentation of Christian ethics.

As was often the case with Paul, the main bugbear was the law. And when Paul talks about the law, he means the religious law rather than any civil or criminal law. The problem Paul identified with the law was that he thought that people were more inclined to put their trust in the law rather than trusting in God. This, Paul said, led them to believe that they could stand or fall by their own individual efforts.

This wasn't something new back then two thousand years ago and it is still something we can see in the church today. Because, when you hear it the way Paul says it, it can all seem so unnervingly easy. "Don't do it like that!" Paul begs his readers. "Give yourselves up, give yourself away, know that God is the active spark in all of life and get rid of any idea you may have that you are at the heart of everything".

Take Paul's call to discern God's perfect will that we heard in verse 2. He said..."you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good,

pleasing and perfect will". Far from being easy, I suspect this can leave us feeling daunted or possibly even worse. Fear of making a wrong choice can prevent us acting, even while knowing that doing nothing is also the wrong thing to do. All of which can leave us at a complete loss.

The same verse finishes with a call to perfection. How can we be perfect? Well, the more I have thought about this, the more I have come to the conclusion that this is less about anything below 100% amounting to abject failure, and more about how God's will and purposes find their ultimate completion and fulfilment. This is more about our proper aspirations. We are not perfect, but here we have something to aim for.

Then there's the call to "sober judgement" in verse 3. This is key because it reminds us to acknowledge ourselves as sinners; redeemed, yes, but still sinners. Even our best efforts will always carry flaws, such as mixed motives and messy outcomes.

Karl Barth was one of the principal Protestant theologians of the last century and he talked about Christian ethics as being... "the great disturbance". He wrote many books on this subject but, put as simply as possible, what he was getting at is that God is not part of any of our human systems, and that nothing we can set up can be capable of understanding God. He thought that it was simply silly to think that we have the means or ability to measure God. Try as we might, we simply can't fit the creator of everything into any kind of formula we can comprehend. In more straightforward terms, God can't be put in a box.

Paul cuts through all this. He rejects all our attempts to live unchanged lives. Give yourselves to God, Paul says. And not in some abstract, theoretical way, but your real physical self. "Present your bodies" is one of Paul's annoyingly inescapable commands.

So, present yourselves for what exactly? Well, this is where it all gets quite complex but you could summarise this by saying that what Paul had in mind was Christian discipleship. Discipleship is like being in the army. There's a reason why such a lot of army discipline feels so mindless. That's because it needs to be instinctive. When the sergeant major says "duck", you need to do just that and, what's more, do it instantly - your life may ultimately depend on it. You can't have a long protracted discussion about whether there is a proper time for Christians to wake up. As Paul says in the very next chapter... "the night is nearly over, the day is almost here". Instead, you get up when the order is given, you march when and where you are told. This isn't a theory then, it's a practice - the practice of discipleship.

So, if one of our problems is our tendency to make discipleship a theory rather than a practice, another is that we like to cling to systems that correct other people's failings whilst leaving our own untouched. But, again, Paul has got hold of this and he is having none of it.

Look squarely at your own strengths and weaknesses, and thank God that they're balanced out in the Christian community, he says. Thank God that we're all called together and can help each other out rather than having to rely on just one person possessing all the required virtues.

So, what about our Gospel reading this morning? What are we to make of that?

I mentioned earlier Karl Barth's 'great disturbance' and this is exactly what Peter and the other disciples had been subjected to ever since they met Jesus. They have constantly had to revise their opinions, not just of themselves, but of others and, indeed, of God in the light of Jesus' unsettling presence. Now, suddenly, we find Jesus making it personal. It was no longer what other people thought. He puts his disciples to the test. He starts with the easy question, the question about other people's opinions. They're all happy to chip in repeating what everybody else has been saying. Remember the stuff about Jesus being John the Baptist, or Elijah or even Jeremiah. But then comes the crunch question.... "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?".

Is this a fair question? Why is Jesus pressing them in this way? I'm not sure it is, at least, not at first sight. After all, surely they've already demonstrated by everything they've given up, by their very presence there, what they believe about Jesus. But it's about more than that isn't it? Why is Jesus pressing them?

Well, Jesus' response to Peter gives us a clue. To know who Jesus is, is absolutely vital. It isn't enough to simply believe that Jesus is very important. It isn't enough to believe that he's like the other prophets and messengers of God. When Peter declares "You are the Messiah", he's saying what has to be said. Jesus is the key to the whole of God's relationship with the whole of creation.

On the basis of this one statement, and on no other ethical basis at all, Peter is now to be the rock on which the church is built. This, then, should also be our defining characteristic, our knowledge of Jesus Christ, and with that knowledge Jesus says that we can open the gates of heaven and be unafraid of Hades. I wonder how often do we ever think in those terms?

It may seem completely odd that Peter's sole qualification for the job - apart from his big mouth and impetuous nature - is that he can recognise the activity of God when he sees it. Peter will go on to completely misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. He will later resist Jesus' intention to turn himself over to the authorities, and he will eventually deny and desert his Lord. But for now... just for now, in just this moment, he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Funnily enough though, that's exactly where Paul was coming from as well. "Be transformed" he says, "so that you may discern the what is the will of God". "Be a living sacrifice". Paul is asking the church in Rome and, by extension asking us also, to dare to keep on aiming for good in a complex and

ambiguous world. We can do this because we trust in God's redemptive power at work in every situation. This sets us free to be what you might call a "work in progress", doing our flawed best, confident that God's purposes will reach their goal in us all. It is the same for us today, just as it was for Peter back then. It was then, and is now, and always has been, the risen Jesus who sets things right. Jesus isn't our sergeant major demanding blind obedience, but he is the source of all the mercies showered on us undeserving sinners. As Paul urges us at the very beginning, we just need to believe it. Amen.