

Sermon for 31 July 2011
Pentecost 7; Proper 13, Year A

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a bit difficult making sense of Paul's
Epistle to the Romans if we only read the letter as
it is presented to us in church. This shouldn't
surprise us. If one were to receive a letter (which
happens less and less now in the age of email) one
would sit down and read it all the way through.
There are twenty-one epistles in the New Testament
(or else twenty, if you don't count Hebrews, which
by tradition has been reckoned a letter by Paul,
but which many biblical scholars believe to be
written by somebody else in a non-epistolary form).
Of these at-least-twenty letters Romans is the
longest, coming in at sixteen chapters. Despite its
length, however, it is very unlikely that the
Christians in Rome to whom the letter is addressed

would have only read five or ten sentences at a time. They would have read the whole thing at once.

Of course that's not how we read it. We listen to five or ten sentences taken from an epistle every week. There is good reason for this; if we insisted on reading the whole of Romans or Ephesians or whatever just as the early church had done—in one sitting—church would go on for well over the hour-or-so we set aside for it every week. But we do certainly miss something when we read the bible as we do. We miss out on the context which makes sense of those little bits of scripture we read every week.

Take this morning's reading from *Romans*. Paul admits to being in great sorrow and unceasing anguish for his own people. He even goes on to say that he would accept being "accursed and cut off from Christ" for the sake of the Jews, from whom came up the law and the prophets and a man named Jesus of Nazareth. And it seems that "here endeth

the lesson". But, in reality, there is much more to be said.

It takes Paul the whole of three chapters to explain why he is in sorrow for his people and what his people's status is with regards to Grace and Salvation. We will, over the next two weeks, hear tiny excerpts from the tenth and eleventh chapters of Romans as the lectionary attempts to tie up the theme Paul introduces in this morning's lesson, but without reading the whole of chapters nine through eleven in one sitting the message will not be as clear as it could be.

Now, in case you were worried, I am not now going to proceed to read the whole of Romans or even the important three chapters to you right now. I will give you an optional homework assignment (for extra credit of course) to do so by yourself over the next week. For now it will suffice to explain briefly how Paul's argument takes shape in chapters nine through eleven.

Our first response might be that Paul's sorrow regards the failure of the law to produce righteousness. Paul immediately counters this assumption by insisting that the Word of God (which spoke through the law and the prophets) cannot possibly fail. Rather, he says, the "children of Israel" is not an entirely ethnic or racial reality but a spiritual reality: those Gentiles who accepted the consummation of the Law in Christ are to be reckoned "children of Israel" and those Jews who rejected said consummation were not "children of Israel" in this most important, spiritual sense.

Paul again anticipates a possible objection to this line of reasoning: namely the suggestion that this would make God out to be unfair. He did, after all, promise Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would be God's chosen people, and this business about spiritual rather than actual descendants being "the children of Israel" seems too clever by half.

Paul gives what might strike us at first as an unsatisfying answer. God, he says, has mercy on those whom he wants to show mercy, and we're not God. This might strike us as unsatisfying, because it seems to gesture toward a sort of Calvinistic "double predestination" which I mentioned briefly a couple of weeks ago. That is to say that God has chosen those whom he intends to send to hell and we have no part in the matter. But, if one were to read Paul closely here one would find that that's not what he's saying at all. That God has decided to be merciful to the Gentiles does not imply that He has chosen to reject the Jews. Rather, God has mercy on the faithful, whether they be faithful in Christ or faithful to the Law. It is simply that those who had pursued the latter seemed by-and-large to have failed in their pursuit. It is in response to this failure that Paul is "in great sorrow and unceasing anguish" for the sake of his kinsmen, and it is why he laments "Brethren, my

heart's desire and prayer to God is that they may be saved."

Finally, Paul comes to the "twenty-four thousand dollar question", the question which his argument in the preceding two chapters of Romans makes unavoidable: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" He is swift in his response. "By no means!" Paul himself was an Israelite. Jesus himself was a Jew. And what's more, Paul says, while the majority of his kinsmen had stumbled, they have not yet fallen. "As regards election," he puts it "they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers." You will forgive my use of a phrase which some of you might find a bit too evangelical, but it is appropriate and true. Paul's deepest desire is that his people may come to "accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour." The joy obtained from such a relationship predicated on God's Grace is greater than any joy that could be obtained by other means. Even so, Paul is insistent that God is

not a liar and he doesn't take back gifts he's given. The Jews are saved, but Paul wants his kinsmen to experience Grace as he has come to experience it.

So that, in a nutshell, is how Paul's argument develops in the central chapters of Romans, but one question remains, and it is the answer to this question from which we find something applicable not just for the Christians in ancient Rome, but for us as well. Why did Paul spill so much ink into addressing this question specifically?

To answer that, we need to recognize who Paul's initial audience was. The church in Rome was a remarkably diverse group. It was situated in the capitol of the most powerful Empire in the world, so this little church would have likely counted among its members people from all over the known world. The most important distinction, however, as you no doubt know, was the distinction between Jews

and Gentiles, of which there were many of both in the Roman church.

Paul's letters were always occasional, which is not to say infrequent, but rather that each was written to respond to a particular issue within the local church. The distinction between Jew and Gentile and how this distinction effected the mission of the church had become controversial. Paul had already had to justify his practice of preaching to Gentiles before the council of the apostles in Jerusalem, and he had convinced the apostles that the Gospel was meant for all, not just for Jews. But just because the apostles had been persuaded by Paul to open up the church to Gentiles, local churches still had that most pernicious of problems which we see still see today and which I have preached about before on more than one occasion: namely, the division of the world into "our kind of people" and "those people".

It is safe to say that this very issue had caused dysfunction in the church in Rome, just as it had in other churches. Jewish Christians might have seen themselves as elite, being the inheritors of word of God as it had been passed down for centuries. Gentile Christians might have seen themselves as superior, since it was not their forefathers but the forefathers of the Jews who had botched things up by not following the Law. There may have been heated arguments within the church in Rome about who really deserved to be there. Paul's discussion about Jews and Gentiles, then, would have been an attempt to combat the elitism and sense of superiority each group likely held.

I hate to burst anybody's bubble, but this still happens today. We still divide ourselves according to race and social class and where one's "people" are from and all other sorts of distinctions which we spend far too much time thinking about. It happens in churches. "Sunday

morning," it has been said, "is the most segregated time of the week." Even in the Episcopal Church this happens, I'm sure you'll be shocked to hear. There are some who put a great deal of emphasis on being a life-long, or "cradle", Episcopalian, and in some instances this comes from a rather elitist disposition.

The Good News and the love it is meant to stir up in us for God and each other does not recognize these walls we build between people. The Gospel is for everyone: Jew or Gentile, black or white, prince or pauper, native or newcomer. May we set aside our proclivity to divide the world between "us" and "them" and see each and every human being as somebody whose heart is a proper place for the living Christ to take up residence and to receive the love which God has given us and expects us to share.

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