

PRESENT YOURSELVES A LIVING SACRIFICE

Romans 12.1-8 and Matthew 16.13-20

I want to start this morning by having a peek at the Epistle. On Sunday mornings I don't often even mention the other readings, as I believe in the short time available I ought to focus on the words and the acts of Jesus. But this morning I want to depart a bit, and I hope the reason will become clear later on.

So then - the epistle to the Romans. This book is often thought of as Paul's last will and testament, a compendium of all his thinking about the faith. Yet I wonder, since there is much in the other letters that is missed out in Romans.

Paul doesn't give us the precise reason why he wrote this great 7,000 word treatise. Romans is certainly one of the most eminent texts of Western history. From Augustine to Luther, from Wesley to Karl Barth, Christian thinkers of every era have been shaped profoundly by this, the longest Pauline epistle. Most theologians regard Romans as Paul's supreme work, the consummate expression of his mature theology.

Among Protestants in particular, no book has been more highly esteemed or carefully scrutinized. Above all, Romans influenced the Reformation vision of true religion as the reception of God's grace through faith. It was Romans and Paul's explanation of Justification by Faith that shook Wesley, a Church of England priest, out of his traditional mechanistic practice of religion and brought him face to face with Jesus Christ in a new and living relationship.

The letter is written 'to all God's beloved in Rome'. My commentaries tell me that the city held about one million people at the time of Paul, with a Jewish population of 20,000 to 50,000. Throughout histories Jewish communities in Gentile cities have been the target of opposition - for their faith, their strange clothes, and their wealth. The Jews (even the Christian Jews) had been expelled by Claudius in 49 AD and they

returned shortly after his death 5 years later.

We know too, that there were serious tensions between the Jewish and the Gentile members of the Christian church. But, as if internal strife is not enough, there were enough of them to a useful target for Nero to pick on when he wanted to regain the popular support of the masses. And so the Christians were subject to an arbitrary and spiteful persecution. The historian Tacitus writes: 'Nero fastened the guilt and afflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace' (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.2). What were these abominations? They thought that the Eucharist involved some form of cannibalism.

Against this background Paul writes to the Christians, to the Gentile and the Jewish elements of God's beloved. The Roman Christians needed was what we would call racial reconciliation and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Paul reminds his **Jewish** readers in particular that they are as damned without Christ as much as are the Gentiles. Christ is the means of reconciliation, and unity and this is the paramount issue. His key theme, perhaps his most important teaching, is that our faith is about being Justified - being able to stand before God with sins forgiven - and the cross of Jesus Christ is the only way reconciliation to God, and peace between ourselves, can be achieved.

In Romans, Paul lays out the facts of the gospel first, in chapters 1-11 and then calls his readers to reconciliation and mutual service in chapters 12-15.

Our reading today comes at the start of part 2, Paul's appeal for unity in Christ. Have a look at it in your pew sheet. To precis it, Paul says this: "Present yourselves before God as a living sacrifice, never mind about Nero. God wants you as a perfectly renewed servant for the sake of the Gospel. Don't get above yourself - but use the gifts God has given you to live in harmony, and in service. We are one body in Christ". Oh how I wish that the church today would listen to that verse. Paul was trying to prevent a schism in the Christian church in Rome. He

reminds them that they are one in Christ.

Elsewhere in two other letters - Galatians and Colossians - Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus". How the Church of God world-wide, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Orthodox - how we all today need to come back to that single most important teaching.

The Church was built on a single, simple and amazing founding principle: "You are the Messiah (or the Christ - the anointed one) the son of the living God". We heard it in our Gospel reading this morning. The declaration was made in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi (not the other Caesarea, which was on the coast) was in the middle of pagan territory, near a grotto devoted to the worship of the Greek deity Pan; Herod had also dedicated a temple for the worship of Caesar there. Thus it was hardly the most expected site for a divine Christian revelation.

I preached before, on the Feast of Peter and Paul in June this year, on this Gospel Reading. Peter blurted out what he clearly didn't then understand. But Jesus told him that it was God who gave him those words. You are the Christ, the son of the living God. You, this man standing here, close enough to touch - you are God. It was blasphemy. That was why Jesus was subsequently crucified. It was Thomas who knelt down in the upper room and said; My Lord and my God. And that is what the church is all about. The rest of the creed is fine if you want to explore all the nooks and crannies of the faith, but the kernel, the nub, the rock, the foundation is simply this: Jesus is Lord.

Paul knew of Peter's declaration. He had met with Peter more than once. They had argued over the problem of Gentile Christians - for Jesus only preached among the Jews alone. Their differences were sorted out and Paul writes with confidence that in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek. And Paul urges them to stop bickering and to return to Jesus Christ, who is the single focus and force of the Christian church,

And what did Paul want his readers to do, and what are we to do? To

become a living sacrifice to God. To be transformed from the values of this world and focussed on the teaching of Jesus. To live out his life in the word.

Last week I was preaching at the Patronal festival of the church St Mary the Virgin Holystone. And I said this: The sacrifice of Mary was to accept God's will, to open her whole young life for God to do with what he had planned. She could have said 'No' just as Jesus could have said 'No' at Gethsemane. But she didn't, she said a cosmic resounding 'Yes' to God. In a moment we shall celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the plan of our salvation rolled on. And in the context of the Eucharist we pray: And here we offer and present O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.

My friends - do we really mean it? Are we really prepared to say 'Yes' to whatever God asks of us - to go wherever he may send us? To give his church here in the valley a strong foundation - financially yes, we really do need to do that, but the sacrifice is more costly, more precious than that: we offer and present O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.

The annual Methodist covenant service has this prayer, written by Wesley himself, with I end. The preamble traditionally includes phrasing such as: ...Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are difficult. Some bring honour, others bring reproach. Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and temporal interests, others are contrary to both... Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

As I pray this prayer, will you open your hearts to make this prayer your own today:

Lord God

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,

exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be
ratified in heaven. Amen.