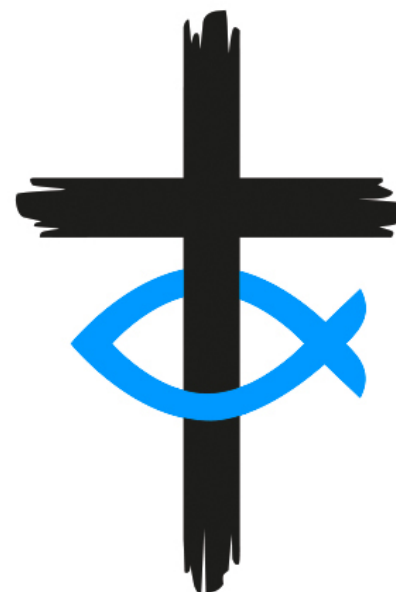


Daily Devotions from the URC
The Letter to the Romans (1)



Friday 17th – Saturday 31st August

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Introduction

This is the longest of Paul's letters and, in summary, was written to explain that salvation is offered to humanity through Jesus. Much of the letter is a complex argument aimed at Jewish converts to Christianity who were brought up to see themselves as morally superior to licentious gentiles. Paul wanted to show that both Jew and Gentile needed to have faith in Christ. The letter also has lots of practical instructions around Christian living.

our hearts to please God who loves us, precisely because God loves us. And we know that for sure because of Jesus who is the Christ. We are set free, not to sin but to love and do good!

Prayer:

Holy God, have mercy on us when our thinking about you and ourselves gets screwed up. Thank you for reminding us of the lengths you have gone to for us and for your world. May we always show your love in our lives. May we always treat one another with deep respect and care. Forgive us the times when we have failed. In the name of our saviour Jesus. Amen.

from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Reflection

The Greek phrase translated here as “By no means” has, in my opinion rather more force than the translation gives it. It means “ No way! Not ever! “ It has the force of “ How could you ever think that?!” Indeed that is the vein in which Paul carries on his thoughts here. Here is complex theology, truly Paul, condensing many deep and difficult thoughts into a few sentences. He is countering those in the church who are saying “ Well then, if God’s loves us we can behave as we like - it won’t matter! Indeed when we behave badly, it will show God’s grace more fully”. Of course we never think like that.. or do we? Do we ever think “ It won’t matter if I just do this or that God will forgive me?” Sometimes I see behaviour in our churches that makes me wonder if some brothers and sisters even think at all about their behaviour. And what about those wrong things I keep doing? Paul, here, is lifting our thinking higher. He recounts all that God in Christ has done for us and he recounts our baptism too. In his usual logical style he goes on to say that for a Christian to keep on sinning wilfully makes no sense whatsoever. In doing as we please we are living in denial of God’s grace, not promoting it. Instead, let us allow God’s love to be our motive to better being and doing. Let us desire with all

Friday 16th August

Francis Brienen, Deputy General Secretary (Mission), URC

Romans 1: 1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection

Recently I was at a meeting where people were asked to introduce themselves by sharing an experience in their life that still shaped who they are today. One person had grown up in a single parent household when that was still unusual, another had become the carer for an elderly parent at age 11, yet another had lived in a war zone. All these events had deeply shaped their identity and how they viewed the world.

When the apostle Paul introduced himself to the Christians in Rome, there is one event that had deeply shaped him. That is his encounter with the risen Christ. That shaped his identity and his entire outlook on life.

Paul is writing to a Christian community of Jewish origin. A community he did not establish and had never visited, so introductions matter!

His greeting is striking. He used only his own name – no co-sender – and called himself a servant of Christ, who was called to be an apostle and who was set apart for the gospel. Scholars think that how Paul describes the gospel in verses 3 and 4 are not his own words, but a Jewish Christian formulation that would have been known to the Roman Christians. It may be that he was trying to show that what he had preached agreed with what the Romans believed.

But perhaps it was simpler. Perhaps Paul was merely trying to express that even though they had never met, they had one thing in common: a new identity in Christ. They were God's beloved, called to belong to Jesus Christ and to be saints: people of grace and peace.

There are many things that shape our identity. Our life stories; our relationships with family, partners and friends; our work and our interests; our goals in life. To what extent have your life experiences been shaped and challenged by the encounter with Christ? When asked to introduce yourself, what story would you tell?

Prayer

God of love, called by you, may we know who we are:
you call us beloved, you call us to belonging, you call us to follow,
you call us to be holy, you call us to be saints.
In all that we are, in all that we say and do,
may we share your grace and peace
and by our love may the world know that we are yours. Amen.

Prayer

Amazing grace-
how sweet the sound-
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

Thank you Jesus! Amen

Amazing Grace: John Newton (1725-1807)

[Saturday 31st August](#)

The Rev'd Peter Meek, East Midlands Synod Moderator

Romans 6: 1 - 14

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed

Reflection

How many times have you seen the sign “Trespassers will be prosecuted”? We have all strayed and are guilty of trespassing, not necessarily onto someone else’s land but often in the way we think and act. We are guilty of straying away from God’s loving, perfect, way and straying into a path that leads to somewhere dark and godless.

In this illustration of God’s grace to us Paul uses the picture of the courtroom with those who are trespassers condemned before the pure, holy and righteous judge. However we also have an advocate, a defence barrister who, not only defends us but stands in our place and take the punishment we should get. We are justified, or found not guilty before God. Paul tells us that we can’t earn this pardon from the judge through our works as it is a free gift.

This is one of the passages that sparked the revolution called the Reformation. No more would we have to do or say the right thing to gain God’s freedom. The work is done, Jesus has taken the punishment for us on the Cross, it is a free gift of grace. In fact there is nothing we can do because none of our works would be enough. I feel the great triumph of this passage is the fact that there is no sin “too big” not to be covered by God’s amazing grace. As Paul puts it “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

It can be easy to lose sight of this amazing truth and slip back into a works based attitude, whereby we have to gain God’s acceptance and forgiveness through our own efforts. However God’s gift of grace is free, and it is offered in love and is for those whose life is in Christ. So today accept afresh God’s wonderful free gift of grace and give thanks for the freedom that Jesus brings us.

Saturday 17th August

The Rev’d Dr Matthew Prevett, is the Trust Secretary for the Yorkshire Synod

Romans 1: 8 - 15

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Reflection

I’ve lived ‘in community’ a number of times in my life. Just like a family situation, you occasionally find yourself getting under each other’s feet, getting on people’s nerves, being frustrated with someone’s behaviour, unable to find a compromise, or even being angry about how someone’s behaved. Of course, as well as being the recipient, we too do our fair share to aggravate, frustrate or annoy. Community life can be a rough ride.

But community life can be inspiring. People encourage one another or give each other support. You can feel down and yet find yourself inspired by the wisdom and generosity of others. People can share a perspective on life that you’ve never seen, or offer a solution to a problem you’re struggling to see. And just as others can inspire, we too

play our part in guiding and encouraging. Community living can open our eyes.

Church life is community living too. We may not live in the same house as others who share our Christian life, but when we gather in community (as our congregations tend to be 'gathered') we share together in the communal living of the Church. We should long to share with one another in spiritual gifts to strengthen each other. We should long to be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. We should long to take part in mission to share our faith with our local communities.

Yet we must remember that our Churches are not always places where people feel able to step over the threshold and be part of the community. Church life is difficult for people for a variety of reasons. While this restricts, we know that when we share communally, when we meet and build each other up, the life of the Church is enriched and strengthened and we can live God's mission for the Church. We must break down barriers in our Church so we can all be encouraged and inspired by the common faith we share.

Prayer

May we be inspired by faith as we inspire others.
May we be encouraged in faith as we encourage others.
May we be love for others as we seek to love the world,
in Jesus's name. Amen.

Friday 30th August

The Rev'd Stuart Nixon, Pioneer Minister, Birchwood, Warrington

Romans 5: 12 - 21

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reflection

Verses 1-5 of this passage underline the necessity of involvement in the purposes of God by dedicating our lives to the good works of proclaiming and demonstrating God's love. In verses 6 – 11 we find this Epistle portion that brings us back to the very centre and core of our religion. Faith doesn't save us because it's a good work, but because it's the hand that reaches out to take the salvation God has prepared for us. Daily repentance won't make or keep us Christian but it is our realization of and response both to our unworthiness and to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Our obedience to God doesn't make us right, but the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes us right with God. It is by the miracle of God's grace that we stand justified before Him, not by sorrow over sin or confession of faith or consecration to divine purposes.

This will always be something mysterious and something that we will have difficulty in understanding. But what we can't understand, we can still celebrate. Through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, God's act of grace and gift of love, we have been made the very sons and daughters of God. We were once the enemies of God, totally estranged from him, but God's love for us, however, is far greater than the evil that brings death and destruction. His grace is more powerful than human wickedness. This is the grace that was wrought and revealed by Jesus Christ, and it is this grace that grants us everlasting life.

Prayer

Loving God, every day should be a day of celebration, a day to sing or shout or proclaim your eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. May our churches, our homes and our lives resound with the glad, joyful sounds of celebration. Amen

Sunday 18th August Psalm 110

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe Community Oxford

1 The LORD said to my Lord:

"Sit here at my right hand,
Until I make your foes a stool
on which your feet may stand."

2 The LORD will make your reign
extend from Zion's hill;
With royal power
you'll rule among
those who oppose your will.

3 When you display your power,
your people flock to you;
At dawn, arrayed in holiness,
your youth will come like dew.

4 Unchangeably the LORD
with solemn purpose swore:
"Just like Melchizedek you are
a priest for evermore."

5 The Lord's at your right hand;
there he will ever stay.
He on his day of wrath will crush
the kings who bar his way.

6 The nations he will judge;
the dead in heaps will lie.
The mighty of the earth he'll
crush— all who his rule defy.

7 A brook beside the way his thirst will satisfy;
And, thus refreshed, he will with joy lift up his head on high.

Reflection

Melchizedek is something of a mystery. He is described in Genesis 14 as the King of Salem (probably Jerusalem), a name which means king of peace. Yet he arrives to praise God for giving Abram victory in battle. This Psalm does not read like a song of peace, but rather seems to exalt war and the bloody defeat of enemies.

Melchizedek is also described as a priest, and he gives Abram a blessing from 'God Most High'. He shares an offering of bread and wine, and receives Abram's offering to God.

Part of the mystery is the lack of further detail. Melchizedek is not part of a family line, or given a history. He is not described as king of a tribe or priest of a holy site. And he vanishes never to appear again. So mysterious is he, in both his identity and actions, that many have wondered if this is in fact a 'theophany', an appearance of Christ, the true King of Peace and Priest forever. The letter to the Hebrews picks up on this, describing Christ as our High Priest in heaven – distancing Christ from the rather more human Levitical Priesthood of the Temple. And this Psalm alludes to the now and not yet of Christ's reign, mixing images of conflict and worship in describing how this will be established.

I am most struck by the description of youth flocking to the king's hill, like the refreshment of the early morning dew. How might we foster this gathering, and allow the Church to be soaked in the refreshing perspective of youth? Can we pray for such a dawn to break? Perhaps the current engagement of young people in climate crisis issues is the foretaste of such a new dawn. Could all ages be blessed by such holiness?

Prayer

Lord, may we be open to your unexpected appearance as king and priest. Challenge us to fight evil. Make us your offering of praise. Help us welcome all ages into your presence so we too may enjoy the blessings of the dew of youth and see your kingdom come. Amen

[Monday 19th August](#)

The Rev'd Steve Faber, Moderator, West Midlands Synod

Romans 1: 16 - 17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in

is happening in our lives or not. It reminds the church that God has a hand over everything and even though that means we are still called to be proactive in situations, God is involved in that and every situation.

Prayer

Faithful God, You love us unconditionally, even when we break trust with each other and you. Enable us to have stronger faith in you and learn how to better trust one another and be trusted so we can more effectively be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

[Thursday 29th August](#)

Sue Knight, Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher, Elder at Reigate Park URC, Lay Preaching Commissioner – Southern Synod

Romans 5: 1 - 11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved

of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Reflection

Faith and trust, they are intangible yet crucial to our lives. How many people have talked about a time their trust was broken? How many of us struggle to trust God because we have had our trust betrayed by those who were central to our lives? How often are faith and trust intermingled?

Paul reminds us in this reading that Abraham had both faith and trust in God without any "proof" and that it is this faith and trust that not only made him righteous but also the sort of example we as Jesus followers should be encouraged by. Abraham didn't "do stuff" to be saved and marked as one of God's, he simply believed and trusted.

This is definitely easier said than done though because although we want to believe that people are good and respectful to each other but we know that some people have abused that, we know that some churches which have been open to the public have been vandalised. As individuals I'm sure there are countless things that could be given as examples, but does all of this make us stop believing in God or believing that there is good in people? It might dent our faith for a while or cause us to ask God why, but hopefully it does not mean we turn our backs on humanity or God.

Paul emphasises Abraham's story because it speaks to us as individuals and ties our present and future to our past as people of faith. This emphasis calls us to trust God whether we know and understand what

it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Reflection

Paul's boldly proclaims that he is unashamed of the Gospel. "Gospel", of course, means Good News. Why would anyone be ashamed of Good News? When we receive our own good news, don't we long to tell others about it, so that they can share in our excitement?

However, Paul is eager to share this good news with the people in Rome. He wants them to be excited about a Jew, a common carpenter (as they might have seen Him), and one who suffered the indignity of crucifixion, the form of execution for the lowest and worst of criminals. What is more, Jesus was killed in Jerusalem, an insignificant capital of an insignificant and remote Roman colony. How could this possibly represent good news to the fine people of Rome?

In these two verses, Paul sets out a summary of all he is about to explain at length and in detail. The Gospel is the power of God to save all people who have faith – Jew, Gentile, citizen, slave, conquerors and vanquished alike. We are all within God's reach through faith in Jesus.

Prayer

Thanks be to You, O God.

You have a plan to save us all through Your Son.

Deepen our faith in You that we might know Your power to save us.

Oh, and God – help us to get excited over the Good News about Jesus, so that we too are unashamed of the Gospel and eager to share it.

Amen.

Tuesday 20th August

The Rev'd Andy Braunston, a minister in the Synod of Scotland's Southside Cluster working with Barrhead, Priesthill, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs.

Romans 1: 18 - 31

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers,

We give You thanks for Your Word,
alive for all people today, through the help of Your Spirit.

We give You thanks for our Faith:
alive and active...renewed for every generation.

You are our Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is:
to You be eternal glory. Amen.

Wednesday 28th August

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker at Ansty Road and St Columba's, Coventry

Romans 4: 13 - 25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise

The question Paul is seeking to answer is: how does a person 'get in' to be a Christian.

By skilfully choosing Abraham and referring to a time in Abraham's life before the covenant (of circumcision), Paul explains that God's promise of salvation is for all (v.11).

One of the many things I find inspiring in the Hebrew Scriptures is the very long-term patience. What was it that Abraham believed of God? Abraham believed God's promise to give him countless descendants. According to Genesis 12-17, the promise was 24 years in the making to the birth of Isaac.

Paul's quote from David refers to Psalm 32:1-2 and extends his teaching that the forgiveness of sins is also for all (vv.7-8).

Paul adds that salvation and forgiveness are gracious gifts from God, "irrespective of works" (v.6).

As the Roman recipients of Paul's letter worked through theological change which brought God's love to all, 500 years ago, in the Reformation, Luther and others tore down barriers which separated folk from a straightforward understanding of God's grace and forgiveness to all:

sola gratia; sola fide; sola scriptura – only by grace; only by faith; only through the Scriptures.

Prayer

Loving God,
You are the living God, the only God, ever to be praised.

We acknowledge Your gift...
giving thanks for the means of Your grace in Jesus.

God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

Reflection

Paul found, in Jesus, new life, meaning, and understanding of his faith. A good preacher - today's passage is part of a sermon as Paul's letters were written to be read aloud. His Jewish listeners would feel smug; critiquing pagans was always good for that!

Rome was the heart of the Empire where most lived lives of desperation surrounded by the wealthy few with their riches, slaves, and decadence. Roman sexual mores were rather more complex than our own, being defined by rôles and actions not identity. The Imperial family wasn't a shining example of restraint. Augustus' wife, Livia, was rumoured to have killed various relations. Tiberius' wife, Julia, publicly flaunted her infidelities whilst he was rumoured to have rather distasteful sexual appetites. Caligula lived life to such excess that he was killed by his own guards - but not before declaring himself to be a god. Claudius' wife, Messalina seemed to follow the family custom of wanton abandon.

Paul saw Roman sexual mores as depraved - a punishment by God on pagans who worshipped creation rather than the Creator. We, however, have a different (though changing) understanding of sexuality. We see sexuality as a given facet of human nature and identity - not a reward, or punishment, for idolatry. We know of faithful Christians whose love and witness would have been unthinkable to Paul.

This doesn't mean we can ignore or write off this passage - there is much here for us. It's always tempting to be dazzled by created things rather than the Creator, to ignore God in the midst of life, to see our

foolishness as wisdom, and to treat others as objects for our own ends. Selfishness and self-centredness manifest themselves over and over again through the centuries, taking on new forms and identities, tempting us to new patterns of idolatry. Pray that we see it in ourselves, have the courage to act, and not distract ourselves by using this passage as a weapon against others.

Prayer

O God,
you call us from darkness into light,
to turn from our idols of technology, status and wealth,
and worship you, our Creator.
Give us the wisdom to discern you at work in our world,
recognise your image in our diversity,
and understand, not weaponize, the Word. Amen.

[Wednesday 21st August](#)

The Rev'd Julian Macro, retired Minister, member of Verwood United Reformed Church

Romans 2: 1 - 16

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, 'We know that God's judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.' Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgement of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing

'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.'

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Reflection

Even the most tangled knot can be untangled with skill and patience.

The Letter to the Romans can be a challenging read: Paul sought to expound the new faith to a mainly Jewish audience with centuries of tradition.

When Alexander the Great encountered the Gordian Knot – a legendary knot of extreme complexity – his unexpected solution was to slice the knot with his sword.

Lawyers use legal precedent to strengthen their arguments; preachers quote well-known theologians to support their sermons. In a similarly skilful move, the Jewish scholar Paul slices powerfully into this theological question by referencing two 'big names' – Abraham and David.

Prayer

O God, we ask that you watch over us, your servants, as we walk in the love of your name...

Be for us our companion on the walk,
our guide at the crossroads,
our breath in our weariness,
our protection in danger,
our shade in the heat,
our light in the darkness,
our consolation in our discouragements,
and our strength in our intentions.

So that we may arrive safe and sound. Amen

Camino de Santiago Pilgrim's Blessing (abridged)

Tuesday 27th August

Walt Johnson | Elder | Wilbraham St Ninian's URC, Chorton,
Manchester

Romans 4: 1-12

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works:

good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Reflection

Following what amounts to a rant in Chapter 1, Paul now addresses the practical implications of living according to God's revelation through Christ.

When I was invited to be a magistrate I had to wrestle with St Luke 6.37, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." Like many others I needed to distinguish between my role as a citizen and my personal dealings with others, and trust that, under God's guidance, I would make the right decisions. Putting it another way, I realised that God is not particularly interested in how many sermons I preach, but whether I practise what I preach.

Here Paul makes this point so very clearly but in doing so seems to offer a religion of works, not of faith alone: "For he will repay according to each one's deeds." Paul was heavily influenced by his Pharisaic

background and is explaining how the system of Law was meant to work, even if it did not. However in the context of the whole of the Letter to the Romans it becomes very clear that it is through God's grace that we are justified by faith alone; as we shall read in 3.20, "For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the Law, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin."

But it remains the case, does it not, that others do judge us by our actions and our words? This puts a great responsibility on us as followers of Jesus Christ. This passage emphasises that "God shows no partiality" – a radical, revolutionary revelation to Paul, the Pharisee, brought up to draw such a clear distinction between Jew and Gentile. In our complex society how readily do we reflect God's love and lack of partiality?

Prayer

Gracious God: guide us, we pray, that in all our dealings with others we may not rush to judgment but seek to understand all who are born to be your children. In our lives may we give a clear example of what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ: trusting in his power Amen.

[Thursday 22nd August](#)

The Rev'd Jenny Mills, Minister at Newport Pagnell URC and West End United Church, Wolverton.

Romans 2: 17 - 29

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach

Reflection

The first section of Romans states the need for the Gospel. But now, Paul says, God has provided a solution, His Son, Jesus Christ, His gift of redemption for us. God is for everyone, and the relationship between Himself and humans is restored on the basis of faith, not by following the law.

Buen Camino! I am writing while walking the way of the Camino Frances, the 500 mile pilgrim route from the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela. It is marked by frequent pointers – brass shells in pavements and cobbles, blue signs with yellow shells, stone mileposts, and often simply yellow arrows painted on the road, lampposts, walls or whatever is available. It's hard to go wrong.

I have been struck by the wayside crosses, often ancient and worn, sometimes modern, some formed simply by pilgrims taking two sticks and weaving them into a fence, where there may be hundreds of others. Each cross represents a person or community for whom the cross has meaning as a symbol of the gift of grace through the redemption of Christ.

On the Camino, there is no distinction. Pilgrims come from all over the world, for many different reasons, and are welcomed by the local communities through which we pass. We walk the same path, carry the same loads, have the same needs for shelter, water, food, rest and companionship. The Camino is a microcosm of God's kingdom, to which we all belong.

I have been following arrows all along the way. In a tiny chapel in the mountains near Astorga, I suddenly saw the arrows in a different light. An arrow in the floor points to the Lord's Table and the Cross behind it, symbols of the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus: Jesus who says 'Yo soy el Camino' – I am the Way.

Prayer

Loving Lord, from the depths of our being we offer you praise and glory. When life is hard, help us to remember all you have done for us, so we may offer you praise and glory. When life is good, help us to remember to give thanks for all you have done for us, so we may offer you praise and glory. Lord, for life itself, we offer you praise and glory. Amen

Monday 26th August

Ruth Tompsett, Elder, Newport Pagnell URC

Romans 3: 21 - 31

But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Reflection

When I was teaching a class of 4 year olds, job-sharing with my friend, we both wore glasses. One day, whilst reading with a small girl, she sighed and said: 'I wish I could get glasses like you both because then I would be able to read words as well, not just talk about the pictures'. Sometimes in life we are like that: we expect to grow and develop without any effort.

The first time I made coffee at church I heard the comment: 'Oh dear, she is using the mugs!' In churches we like to make 'rules' about how things are done, from the Communion cloths (starched/ square?) and chalice (full or empty?) to the placing of chairs (in rows, evenly spaced!). We like our routines and structures because they make us feel safe; this can become an issue when our ways of doing things exclude others or limit change. How easy is it to become so familiar with our ways and habits that we fail to see we are excluding others?

In this reading, Paul is telling those in positions of responsibility that faith is not about just following rules. This text has real echoes of Jesus' teaching as cited in St Matthew 7:5 about removing the log out of our own eye so we can see the speck in our neighbour's! To grow in faith takes time, thought, study and involves being prepared to be challenged, open minded and willing to reflect on our words, actions and accepted attitudes.

God calls us to go out and share the Gospel and to do so from the heart. If we do those things faithfully, we cannot fail to be changed by what occurs. God knows we will be blessed because of it; so will the Church and so will the world.

Prayer

Dear God, help us when we get so hooked up on doing things right, following the rules, being the certain type of person. May we heed reminders of the need to intentionally include and find ways to look to the heart of relationships, not just at the practicalities. May we find time to reflect and accept your promptings to change. This we pray from the heart. Amen.

[Friday 23rd August](#)

Jo Patel, Wattisfield URC, Suffolk

Romans 3: 1 - 8

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written,

Reflection

I love the Psalms, they have so much to offer us in worship and in life; they offer a glimpse of what a real, faith-filled life looks like. We sometimes overlook them, perhaps because they appear difficult to relate to, they seem so divorced from daily life.

I write this as Brexit and our elected officials are in flux – no-one appears to know what is happening. It is not the only headline: terrorists attack mosques in New Zealand and churches in Sri Lanka; knife crime is out of control; severe flooding has caused devastation in parts of southern Africa, and head teachers worry about how their schools will survive, let alone thrive. Yet our Psalm encourages us to praise God – for many that may seem hard, if not impossible.

The Psalmist not only tells us to praise God but why we should. We are reminded of what God has done, from feeding to redeeming and everything in between. But more than that, in an ever-changing world, God is constant; trustworthy; faithful. We may despair of ever finding our way, but God is there – always and forever.

Perhaps that's what we need to be reminded of, we need to remember what God has done for us and that God is there for us. For when we are told that fear of the Lord is wisdom, it is not fear in that we should be frightened of God, no, it is remembering God with awe and respect because of what he has done.

When we objectively look at what God has done for us, we can offer praise. Just think of praising God, when even in the depth of our souls, the whole world appears to be against us, surely that is real wisdom, in fear of the Lord.

Prayer:

Creator God, please forgive us for holding such misplaced illusions of self-grandeur. May we walk through these lands remembering that they were crafted by your hands. May we remember that the Heavens are your domain, and we can only enter by your gracious invitation. Help us to treat each other with the dignity that you have bestowed on all humanity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sunday 25th August Psalm 111

The Rev'd Branwen Rees, East Wales Regional Minister

1 Praise to the LORD!

I will extol him
while gathering with the upright.

2 Great are the works of God,
and pondered
by all who in them take delight.

3 His deeds are glorious
and majestic;
his righteousness endures always.

4 He caused his works
to be remembered;
kind is the LORD and full of grace.

5 Food he provides
for those who fear him;
his covenant for ever stands.

6 His mighty works
he showed his people
by giving them the nations' lands.

7 Faithful and just
are all his actions;
all his commands are faithful too,
8 Steadfast for ever and for ever.
The works of God
are right and true.

9 He sent redemption
for his people;
his covenant remains the same,
Ordained by him
throughout all ages—
holy and awesome is his name.

10 Fear of the LORD
gives rise to wisdom;
All those who walk in upright ways
Have insight and good
understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.

'So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging.'

But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), 'Let us do evil so that good may come'? Their condemnation is deserved!

Reflection

This passage challenges me to look at the difference my faith and behaviour makes to my present life. Some of the Roman church had fallen into entitlement and presumption, thinking that because of their Jewish background and privilege they were always going to be forgiven and blessed as God's chosen people. They assumed sin really didn't matter because it allowed God to be glorified more!

I read here about how important it is that life is lived in the fullness of all that God has for me, every day. There is no 'sleeping on the job' when it comes to living a new life in Christ. I am blessed and filled with all that God has when I live alive in prayer, come afresh to worship Him each day and give Him glory through how I live in honesty and truthfulness. God, I believe, doesn't actually need our worship or to be glorified. He is not dependant on how I live, but His heart is only longing for me to 'get it', to realise how much I am loved. My sin doesn't bring Him more glory just because I then need more forgiveness. The Romans were missing the point and therefore missing the reason that Jesus died as the ultimate sacrifice. Forgiveness is gifted to us by the blood of Christ and to 'mess' with that doesn't grow our hearts and minds into the mature people and the mature Church that brings God real glory.

Prayer

My Saviour, Lord and King, to worship you daily is a privilege, a gift and a joy. Today I open my heart afresh and lay my life exposed in your presence. I settle myself in your throne room and drink your refreshing water. I taste the nourishment of your Word to me as I read. Lord, be in front, behind, above and holding my life, surrounding everything I do. Thank you for your never ending presence that strengthens and guides every day. Amen

[Saturday 24th August](#)

Daniel Harris is an ordinand at Westminster College

Romans 3: 9 - 20

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness,
there is not even one.’

‘Their throats are opened graves;

they use their tongues to deceive.’

‘The venom of vipers is under their lips.’

‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’

‘Their feet are swift to shed blood;

ruin and misery are in their paths,

and the way of peace they have not known.’

‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Reflection

Today’s Scripture reading offers a damning assessment of humanity. But these words have a chilling resonance when we read it in the context of today’s news headlines.

The damage to the environment speaks for itself. Plastic waste drifts ashore on remote Pacific islands, micro-fibres are blowing on the winds in the Pyrenees, and sweet wrappers have been found in the ocean depths. We even have a growing junk problem in low-Earth orbit threatening human space flight and satellite operations.

We have sought to exercise mastery over nature and tainted the world around. It seems that even the ends of the earth are stained with the damage of human excess.

In his essay *The Abolition of Man* C S Lewis writes that we do not just seek to control the natural world. We also seek to control the metaphysical world - the spiritual space around us. We dictate the terms that we will relate to God. We have even declared that God is dead. We are trying to be masters of our reality and damaging the sacred spaces in the process.

So how should we travel through the physical and spiritual sacred spaces around us? The prophet Micah offers us a simple rule of thumb. “The Lord has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6.8)