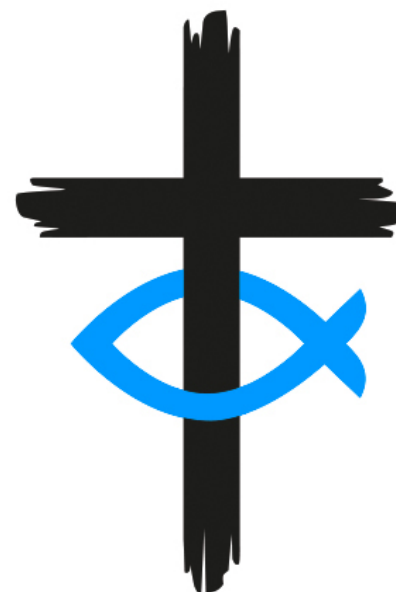


**Daily Devotions from the URC**  
**The Letter to the Romans (3)**



*Sunday 16th – Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> October*

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times of adversity and pray for us should be the ones for whom we should earnestly be seeking God's rich blessings.

Prayer :-

Jesus, the Name higher than any other,  
which means so much to us who believe.  
Emmanuel, God with us, Pearl beyond all price.

Thank you for our friends who have a special place in our hearts,  
and have been given to us by yourself.  
May we love, treasure, respect them and faithfully  
uphold them remembering them as your special gifts to us,  
Praying for their good as you have shown us by example. Amen.

## Sunday 15th September Psalm 114

Michael RJ Topple is a Lay Preacher and member of Chappel URC, Essex

1 When Isr'el out of Egypt went,  
and did his dwelling change,  
When Jacob's house  
went out from those  
that were of language strange,

2 He Judah did his sanctuary,  
his kingdom Isr'el make:  
3 The sea it saw, and quickly fled,  
Jordan was driven back.

4 Like rams the mountains,  
and like lambs  
the hills skipped to and fro.  
5 O sea, why fledd'st thou?  
Jordan, back  
why wast thou driven so?

6 Ye mountains great,  
wherefore was it  
that ye did skip like rams?  
And wherefore was it, little hills,  
that ye did leap like lambs

7 O at the presence of the Lord,  
earth, tremble thou for fear,  
While as the presence of the God  
of Jacob doth appear:

8 Who from the hard and stony rock  
did standing water bring;  
And by his pow'r did turn the flint  
into a water-spring.

### Reflection

This Psalm is probably my favourite of all 150. When I was younger, it was the Psalm we used to sing in the school choir to the Anglican Chant 'Tonus Peregrinus', and the ancient words of the Book of Common Prayer still spring to mind whenever I read it - 'When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from among a strange people'.

Psalm 114 is a Psalm that, since the 6th Century, has been used at Christian burial services and while ministering to those who are dying. It also has an association with Easter Day, and is often read during Easter services - the deliverance of Israel seen as a metaphor for our deliverance from sin.

First and foremost, though, this Psalm is a song of God's strength, power, and glory. It is a Psalm that tells of God's glories in times of old, when God led the people of Israel out of slavery, and prepares us for the wonders and glories to come.

It is around this time that the Church enters a season known as 'Creationtide'. Described by its organisers as 'a period... dedicated to God as the Creator and Sustainer of all life', it is during this season that we are called to give thanks for the world in which we live. Many churches will hold their Harvest Services around this time - they will give thanks to God for the blessings of this life, our food, our homes, our families and friends.

But it is also at this time that we are called to remember those who go without, those for whom the harvest is not a time of celebration. It is our duty to provide for them, just as the Lord provides for us.

Let us pray that we may never forget 'the presence of the Lord', and pray that He may continue to provide to those who need it.

Prayer:

...Living Lord, prepare us now  
Your willing helplessness to share;  
To give ourselves to sacrifice,  
To overcome the world's despair;  
In love to give our lives away,  
And claim Your victory today. *(A. Gaunt, b.1935, R&S 611 v4)*

### Monday 16th September

Fredwyn Hosier. Synod pastoral Consultant, Thames North and Elder at Palmers Green URC

Romans 10: 5 - 13

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart'

Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

Reflection

Too many people these words may appear to be just a list of names, like a genealogy which some of us may well have grappled with in other places within Scripture. Perhaps even like a Christmas card list, with little seen or heard from people other than this annual remembrance. However, to Paul these were genuine people who had featured in his life and whom he knew, loved, cared about, and prayed for. These really meant something to him and held particular spiritual depth and significance.

The study of names and the meaning which each one possesses is fascinating. They speak of actual people, rather than just empty words on a page, written centuries ago. People and their individual personality DO matter so much, leaving their imprint upon our hearts. Who still remembers their first Teacher at School, or Sunday School? Their first "best friend" or even first boyfriend or girlfriend?

These names meant something to Paul who wrote fondly about them. They are people he loved, illustrating importantly that people are of the greatest value to us, as they are to God. Later on we read of Paul's concern for these known and loved people to be vigilant concerning those who would cause a break in the beauty of such relationships, through causing disharmony and opposition. However, this is nipped in the bud as the reassuring ability of the God of peace is given pre-eminence.

Oh that we too valued our friends in the faith as much as Paul did. Sadly all too easily there can be negativity rather than love and a sad lack of acknowledgement of the true value of our friends. Those who stand by us in

Saturday 5th October

Verena Walder Lay Preacher and Elder Tabernacle URC, Mumbles.

Romans 16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia,] my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good, and guileless in what is evil. The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Reflection

What was I thinking? I know there will be many of you who will relish a theological challenge on a Monday morning, but I think it was, to me, a simple statement that drew me to this reading. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

I am not sure it is that simple. Aren't there pages of Terms and Conditions that have to be read and agreed to? And, surely there are huge differences between Jew and Greek, and many other groups of people today? We don't have to look far beyond the places we inhabit to find those who are marginalized and excluded. Even if, and when, they call on the name of the Lord!!

Maybe it is only God who can bridge the huge divides that surround us.

On a Monday morning it may seem an insurmountable task, but maybe calling on the name of the Lord is a good place to start.

Prayer

Hear us, when we call on your name, Lord.

Save us, Save us.

And let us be a bridge over the chasms of division and exclusion in our world.

Do not let us fall. Amen

Tuesday 17th September

Dorothy Stewart Courtis, Lay Preacher and member, Thurso URC

Romans 10: 14 - 21

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for

'Their voice has gone out to all the earth,  
and their words to the ends of the world.'

Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,

'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;  
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.'

Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

'I have been found by those who did not seek me;  
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.'

But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'

#### Reflection

We all know them: the people who have their doors slammed shut to anything that smacks of Church or religion. And we know the people who grieve over them: their parents, agonising over where they went wrong. 'We took them to Sunday School, church...'

We don't want to acknowledge that some ground just might be stony ground for the Gospel. We better understand the folk who in their twenties and thirties are 'too busy' with carving out careers, building families, creating homes, dealing with the overwhelm of modern life...

be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

#### Reflection

The world that Paul knew was much smaller than ours, and time was much more compressed too. This first generation of believers had been expecting all things shortly to come to an end, though some will certainly have recalled Jesus's words that "the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13.10). As the years are ticking by, I sense that Paul is checking up on himself and the scope of his own ministry. And like many of us, he probably wonders if he could have done more.

Here he is reflecting on how far he has been, and how far there is yet to go. He began the letter by expressing the hope that he would soon be able to visit his readers in Rome – a surprising ambition as he is usually concerned only with churches that he has founded himself, "so that I do not build on someone else's foundation". Then he knows that there are promises to keep, which will mean first travelling back to Jerusalem, with the money that others have been collecting for the "mother church". Jesus's disciples realise that they are never completely free agents: we may try to make plans, but there are always new challenges and demands on our time.

But now Paul discloses one further ambition – to go to Spain, which is of course in his world as far anyone can go. This is not an item on an ageing man's bucket list, nor is the journey contemplated just for the satisfaction of saying "from Jerusalem as far as Illyricum... and even further". Paul is thinking about what faithfulness to the Gospel may now be demanding of him – to take the good news to earth's very extremity.

But so far as we know, he never made it to Spain. God's plans and ours do not always coincide.

#### Prayer

Help us in our life journeys to follow your directions  
to be ambitious only to carry out your will  
and to know the fullness of Christ's blessing  
in the company and service of his people. Amen

When we care for one another, we want to be building each other up. Sometimes, however, we need to be prepared to have difficult conversations. Paul explained that he will only speak of what Christ has accomplished in his own life. We can be all too ready to exploit one another's struggles when really, we struggle in this area ourselves. Paul brought something to the attention of these people, out of genuine care, because he had dealt with it in himself. There is no sense of judgement here, only a deep concern for the welfare of the people and the sharing of the Gospel.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to have the wisdom to know how to approach difficult conversations for the sake of your Gospel. Let us not be judgemental but to approach things in a loving way seeking your guidance at all times. In Jesus name. Amen

Friday 4th October

The Rev'd John Durell Retired minister Member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

Romans 15: 22 - 32

This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may

But still our churches miss them. The younger generation. We can hope they will one day come back. An elderly friend said of her grandchildren, 'Wait till the troubles come, the sorrows. See where they'll turn.' And I knew she hoped they would turn back to the church they'd been brought up in.

But will they? We can load ourselves with responsibility and reproach: are we keeping up with the times? Are we offering the kind of services they might be attracted to? And even, how can they turn back if we don't keep the doors open for them? That is the reason behind the anguish of many a congregation forced to close their doors. What if Dad had sold up and moved just before the prodigal son set off for home?

Maybe we take too much upon ourselves. It is God who lights the flame of faith in our hearts and keeps the flicker going. We may see no harvest for our thousands of words and endless pleas. We may regretfully give up and close the doors.

But a God who can raise up a people that was no people, who can continue loving a disobedient and contrary people, won't give up on any of the folk we care about. Just as He hasn't given up on the children of Israel.

Prayer

When we hear the cry that we need young families and children in our congregations, remind us that You know who You want to send. You know who You want us to minister to, and how. Remind us that Your ideas are different from ours, and that our role is obedience and trust.

Wednesday 18th September

The Rev'd Andy Braunston ministers in the Synod of Scotland's Southside Cluster and co-ordinates the Daily Devotions project.

Romans 11: 1 - 10

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed

your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.’ But what is the divine reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written,

‘God gave them a sluggish spirit,  
eyes that would not see  
and ears that would not hear,  
down to this very day.’

And David says,

‘Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling-block and a retribution for them;  
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and keep their backs for ever bent.’

Reflection

In this passage Paul struggled with two ideas. As a faithful Jew he believed that God hadn’t rejected the Jewish people - the Covenant still stands. As a Christian, who had come to realise that trust in Jesus’ faithfulness is what mattered, Paul realised that simply being part of a chosen people wasn’t enough for salvation. Paul asserted that the Jewish people are still the people of God but, at the same time, held that simply being part of the Chosen People wasn’t enough.

Paul used the idea of the Remnant; after committing genocide against pagan priests, Elijah had to flee the wrath of Queen Jezebel. Believing he was the only one left who truly worshipped God, Elijah had to be reminded that there were 7,000 others who had also held firm. From this a remnant theology grew as the prophets realised there would never be a time when the whole nation was faithful to God. Paul used this dividing the wheat from the chaff to differentiate between those, in God’s chosen people, who held firm and those who succumbed to a sluggish spirit.

Thursday 3rd October

The Rev’d Josh Thomas, Minister of Petersfield and Liss URC with the Beacon Church Bordon

Romans 15: 14 - 21

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written,

‘Those who have never been told of him shall see,  
and those who have never heard of him shall understand.’

Reflection

When parents evening came around, I, as a child, made sure I booked appointments with the teachers I knew wouldn’t give such glowing reports right in the middle of one’s I knew who would. It was kind of like a constructive criticism sandwich and it meant my parents started and ended the evening hearing wonderful things about me and not focusing on the negative! I’m not sure how well it worked but this the tactic Paul employed in this part Romans.

Having never met them before, Paul wrote of how he heard positive things about them, how they were full of goodness and able to instruct one another. He was, however, also keen to point out that he had to oppose some of their strongest prejudices in order for them to be true to the message of the Gospel. In this section of Romans Paul shows the interest that he had in the welfare of these people he had never met.



But it is the first and last verses that make my heart sing. There is enough challenge and encouragement in these words to last a lifetime, let alone just today!

“Welcome one another ... just as Christ has welcomed you” (v.7)

For the Christians in Rome, and in the context of this letter, this meant welcoming one another across the Jew/Gentile divide. What does it mean for you? Who is it that you or I might be inclined to avoid or dismiss, but in fact are to welcome? Our welcoming of those God brings us into contact with day by day is to be of the same depth and generosity as Christ’s welcome of us.

And lest we be discouraged as we face up to the gap between our intention and our practice, we have in verse 13 a glorious benediction to bless us in the coming hours of this day.

When I consider the little church in the hostile capital of Empire that was Rome, I find this blessing truly remarkable. Not only did they exist in a threatening external environment, but this letter indicates serious tensions within the community itself. Yet Paul’s calls on God to fill them with joy, peace and hope. It is an expectant prayer that springs from the writer’s own experience.

So may it be for us on this ordinary autumnal Wednesday. Whatever each of us is facing today, personally or more widely as a community, God is the God of hope, who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, makes real for us hope in abundance.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for welcome.  
Help us, today, to understand more deeply  
that at the heart of everything is your welcome, for us, and for everyone.  
And so fill us with all joy and peace in believing.

Thank you, Lord, for hope, hope which is rooted in You.  
We hold before you situations where hope is hidden ...  
God of hope make us today  
people of hope and of welcome. Amen

Of course Paul’s insight applies to us too. Christians can have a sluggish spirit believing that church membership, even regular attendance is enough for salvation. We can serve as members, elders or ministers and believe that all will be well - but if we fail to trust in Jesus’ own faithfulness we can act as if we are, what a friend of mine calls, functional atheists. When I did my theology degree, back in the 1980s, the Church growth people forecast that the URC would die by the year 2,000 simply by plotting our decline on a graph and extrapolating. Sociologists will tell us that increased longevity has saved the URC, I hope it’s a radical trust in Jesus believing he hasn’t finished with us yet!

Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
you were faithful,  
travelling to the Cross and beyond,  
waiting for vindication, exultation and glorification.  
Help us to be full of faith,  
faith that you haven’t finished with us,  
faith that our lives, words, and actions touch others with your love,  
that we may continue to be part of your chosen and faithful people. Amen.

[Thursday 19th September](#)

The Rev’d Ruth Watson, minister of Patricroft and Worsley Road URCs in Salford.

Romans 11: 11-14

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

#### Reflection

Have you ever watched a tree grow? Apart from the fact you would need a very long time, it is fascinating to see how trees develop from a fragile sapling into mighty trees. They provide shelter from the elements, food for animals, oxygen for the planet. They protect properties, provide a playground for children and playthings with conkers, yet still stand with a certain elegance – made more pronounced when viewed in winter in silhouette. But they can move with the wind so they do not break.

Yet trees remember every year (the deciduous ones anyway) to shed their leaves and grow new ones. Dying branches are discarded and new shoots grow. Roots spread out in all directions and break through the human-made restrictions around them in roads and pathways.

How much of this is true of our faith? Do we provide shelter to those who feel exposed? Do we provide food for those who are hungry? Do we provide a safe place for people to pray (and play) and learn? Do we conduct ourselves with a certain elegance while being flexible enough to allow ourselves to be accessible? And all of this while discarding old ideas and being open to new ones? We can learn a lot from trees – take a moment to just look and see...

#### Wednesday 2nd October

The Rev'd Gwen Collins, retired minister, member of Avenue St Andrews URC, Southampton

Romans 15: 7 - 13

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name';

and again he says,

'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';

and again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him';

and again Isaiah says,

'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### Reflection

For weeks we have been immersed in Paul's closely argued theology. In today's passage he repeats his conviction that Christ is for Jew and for Gentile, and he quotes the Old Testament in support of this understanding.

another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### Reflection

Yes, the strong should help the weak, of course they should! It's common sense isn't it? This is one of those principles which seems so right - until we try to figure out how it might work in practice.

In the business world, weak might be a bottom line with very small numbers, or very large, but negative, numbers. Strong might be fingers in big well-known pies. In the sports world, strong might be having rich owners, expensive players at the top of their game, huge publicity budgets. Weak might be the local cricket team living from hand to mouth, with players giving up their free time not only to play, but to maintain the cricket field and pavilion.

So what about the church world? Strong could be a large congregation on Sunday mornings, it could be a large reserve fund to provide for those "rainy days" and weak could be the opposite of those measures.

However, a church can have either, or both, of those features but still be weak if its focus is on protecting the status quo and pulling up the drawbridge of self-preservation.

And a church can be strong with a small congregation, and with no reserve funds available, if that church has a vision which has been prayerfully discerned and which gives it the confidence to step out in faith and join in God's adventure even if the risks look insurmountable.

### Prayer

Father, help us to see our strengths as you see them and help us to use those strengths to help others, be they individuals or fellowships, who have not yet found or accepted your strength and encouragement. Help us also to see our weaknesses as you see them, and be willing and able to accept help from others to overcome our weaknesses and to give you the glory. Amen.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to be a tree in my faith:  
with firm roots, spreading out to my community;  
with strong branches to provide help for others  
and take away my pride that I might allow the wind to blow through me to inspire me to movement. Amen

### Friday 20th September

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired URC minister, Chair of the Society for Ecumenical Studies

### Romans 11: 25 - 36

So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.'  
'And this is my covenant with them,  
when I take away their sins.'

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

'For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counsellor?'  
'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?'

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.

#### Reflection

This present age is preoccupied with 'fake news' and an approach to truth which proclaims 'I'm right and you're wrong', without worrying, in any depth, about what the basis of truth might be.

The passage from Romans continues with Paul's struggles with the complexities of faith and the issues of his day. Can the Israelites just be condemned for their hardness of heart? No, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. As God has been with their ancestors, so God is with the Jewish people of Paul's day.

It's not just a matter of Gentiles being saved and Jews being condemned. Rather, the conclusion that Paul comes to is that, in fact, all have shared in disobedience, so all may share in God's mercy. In Luther's classic expression we are all 'both sinners and righteous'.

Paul concludes his wrestling with the question of what the truth is about Jews and Gentiles with a doxology. In doing this, he points to the way in which truth contains a mystery beyond human comprehension. At the heart of God lies a mysterious 'otherness', in the presence of which the only response is humility in the face of God and praise to the glory of God.

And yet, God is also the one who is revealed in the incarnation, and who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is daily present in each part of human life.

Truth is a gift, into which I can grow, not a commodity which I can own. The truth of God is based on the mercy of God, revealed in love in Jesus Christ. Paul's writing in Romans is an attempt to interpret the Gospel for the Church.

But at the end of the day he points, not to himself, but to the riches, wisdom and knowledge of God.

#### Prayer:

O God, I give thanks for Your mystery and Your presence.

of food and drink, and today's stumbling blocks might also include other matters, such as styles of worship or how we dress in church. To build up our church community, we need to think of our brothers and sisters and how our behaviour affects their conscience – so if we visit a church where shoulders are expected to be covered, we should cover our shoulders, even if we are convinced that Jesus has no objections to bare shoulders.

We are dependent on one another for mutual support – for both giving and receiving, so that we are constantly building each other up in our faith, and setting each other free to respond to God's calling, rather than putting stumbling blocks in each other's way by judging others' behaviour unfavourably. We are not the ones to set standards of 'holiness' for ourselves or others – we need to leave the judging to God.

As we walk the way, we need to consider not just our own journey, but also how our journey impacts on the journeys of others, so that together we grow as followers of Jesus.

#### Prayer

Father, we often blunder on our way, with little thought about how we affect others by what we do or say. Help us to live with love and consideration for our fellow disciples, so that as a body of Christ, we are one with you. Amen

#### Tuesday 1st October

The Rev'd Sheila Coop, Minister at Macedonia URC, Failsworth and Oldham Town Centre Chaplaincy

#### Romans 15: 1 - 6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one

## Prayer

You, O Lord, I trust. It's other people about whom I'm not so sure. Often, I play 'safe' and treat others with suspicion. Help me to trust not only you but my neighbour. Amen

## Monday 30th September

The Rev'd Sue Cossey, Synod Pastoral Adviser, Bristol

### Romans 14: 13 - 23

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

### Reflection

In his book, *Being Disciples*, Rowan Williams writes of what Christian faith and discipleship can offer Western society, where everything is a matter of personal preference and my human rights are paramount. He describes 2 principles: firstly, we are each of equal value to God, and secondly, we are all dependent on one another. These principles are consistent with this passage. As we are each of equal value to God, and as God loves each one of us, then we need to love one another and help each other. If I make someone struggle in their faith by the way I live, I am not showing love to that person. Paul speaks

You are other than me, yet You are close to me.  
Forgive me when I claim to hold the truth on my own.  
Grant me day by day the humility to see that truth lies with You.  
May I grow in your love and grace  
As I grow, may I give you the glory. Amen

## Saturday 21st September

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister, The Crossing (Methodist & United Reformed Church), Worksop & Wales Kiveton Methodist Church

### Romans 12: 1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

### Reflection

Sacrificial living and non-conformist outlook. Both are counter-cultural, costly, demanding, and do not necessarily come easily or naturally to us.

The word "sacrifice" can all too readily be used when, in fact, at best we are referring to "inconvenience" rather than any significant costly gift. Being challenged to present our bodies as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" underlines the fact that in every decision and choice we make we are willing to place our commitment to Christ and neighbour before our own comfort or desire. Inevitably we may want to place limits on our generosity and to negotiate deals that leave us with some measure of comfort but those who respond to the call to sacrificial living must be ready – inspired and energised by the One who gave his all – to forget limits and conditions. In the words of Horatius Bonar: Fill thou my life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise, that my whole being may proclaim thy being and thy ways. Praise in the common things of life, its goings out and in; praise in each duty and each deed, however small and mean. (Horatius Bonar, 1808-1889)

Non-conformity – being wise and strong enough to risk standing out from the crowd and against the tide as and when we discern that it is right to do so. We risk making ourselves unpopular. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one example of faithful non-conformity – standing up against the sinister forces of Nazism (and paying the ultimate price for doing so). In his book, *Costly Discipleship*, he writes, “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate ... Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a [person] will gladly go and sell all that [they have].”

#### Prayer

Fill every part of me with praise;  
let all my being speak  
of thee and of thy love, O Lord,  
poor though I be and weak.

So shall no part of day or night  
from sacredness be free;  
but all my life, in every step,  
be fellowship with thee.

#### Sunday 22nd September Psalm 115

The Revd Nigel Uden, of Downing Place URC, Fulbourn URC and Stetchworth & Cheveley URC in Cambridgeshire and a Moderator of the General Assembly

1 Not unto us, LORD, not to us,  
but do thou glory take  
Unto thy name, ev'n for thy truth,  
and for thy mercy's sake.

2 O wherefore  
should the heathen say,  
Where is their God now gone?  
3 But our God in the heavens is,  
what pleased him he hath done.

4 Their idols silver are and gold,  
work of men's hands they be.  
5 Mouths have they,  
but they do not speak;  
and eyes, but do not see;

6 Ears have they, but they do not hear;  
noses, but savour not;  
7 Hands, feet, but handle not,  
nor walk;  
nor speak they through their throat.

16 Hear me, O LORD!  
I am your servant true;  
I am your servant  
and your handmaid's son,  
And from my chains  
I have been freed by you.

17 Thank-off'rings  
I will sacrifice to you  
And call upon the name of God  
the LORD.  
18 When all his people  
in assembly meet,  
With joy I will fulfil my solemn word

Before his people I will keep my vows,  
19 Within the courts of our God's holy place,  
Within the city of Jerusalem.  
Unto the LORD alone be all the praise!

#### Reflection

‘Father, I cannot tell a lie’ – the famous admission of George Washington that he had felled the cherry tree – was of course a lie, a fabrication. The question posed by the BBC TV panel show. ‘Would I lie to you?’ seems almost rhetorical. Whether we care to acknowledge it or not, lying is part of our standard discourse. Is lying inherent? Are we programmed to deceive? Of course, we offer mitigation – Are white lies really lies? How about the re-assuring lie, the convenient lie, the kindly lie, the lie that resolves the situation ...?

We are tutored from childhood to believe that lying is a Bad Thing. My teacher told me I should never tell a lie/ Because a lie will bring your troubles sure as pie (but I like pie!)/ It's an awful thing to do/ And it's true as true is true,/ You'll get caught and then you'll start to cry ... you're much better off to never tell a lie./ Not even sometimes. Remember, never never tell a lie. (InsideOut A Cappella) But we do.

Yet, even if there is truth in ‘all are liars’, it's a dangerous presumption. The Psalmist speaks ‘in my haste’, a knee-jerk reaction, a defensive response, the starting assumption, perhaps even a default position. It's opposite is trusting. Which creates for better community, more positive relationships, less suspicion? If lying is the norm, many will follow the norm; if trust, then trust is built. There's a saying in an old Icelandic code: ‘So shall every word be, as it is spoken’ (13th century *Jónsbók*). Being trustworthy and seeing the other as worthy of trust go hand in hand.

When faced with differences in practice or approach, give us understanding and tolerance in place of judgement.

Help us to work together to discern your guidance in how we should worship, serve, and live together in our shared walk of faith as a community of believers and friends. Amen

### Sunday 29th September Psalm 116

The Rev'd Dr Jack Dyce is Emeritus Professor of Nordic Theology at the Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College and a member of Port Glasgow URC.

1 I love the LORD  
because he heard my voice;  
He listened when I cried  
to him for aid.

2 I'll call on him as long as I shall live,  
Because he turned to hear me  
when I prayed.

3 The cords of death  
gripped and entangled me,  
Upon me came  
the anguish of the grave;  
With grief and trouble  
I was overcome  
4 Then on the name of God  
I called: "LORD, save!"

5 The LORD our God  
is kind and full of grace;  
Both righteous  
and compassionate is he  
6 The LORD protects  
all those of childlike faith;  
When I was in great need,  
he rescued me.

7 Rest, O my soul;  
God has been good to you—

8 For you, O LORD,  
have saved my soul from death,  
My feet from stumbling  
and my eyes from tears,

9 That I may live for you  
while I have breath.

10 I trusted in the LORD,  
and then I spoke;  
I said in anguish: "I am sorely tried".

11 And in the very depths  
of my dismay,  
"All men are liars— every one!" I cried.

12 How can I thank the LORD  
for all he's done?

13 With gratitude  
salvation's cup I'll raise;

14 I'll call upon his name, and will fulfil  
My vows to him  
before his people's face.

15 The LORD holds dear  
the death of all his saints.

8 Like them their makers are, and all  
on them their trust that build.

9 O Isr'el, trust thou in the LORD,  
he is their help and shield.

10 O Aaron's house,

12 The LORD of us  
hath mindful been,  
and he will bless us still:

He will the house of Isr'el bless,  
bless Aaron's house he will.

13 Both small and great,  
that fear the LORD,  
he will them surely bless.

14 The LORD will you,  
you and your seed,  
aye more and more increase

### Reflection

Psalm 115 invites us to consider in whom we put our trust: ourselves, human constructs, or God?

There are many reasons to trust ourselves. Driving, for example. What right have we to get on the public highway if we do not trust our own ability to do so? Or if we are nurses, how can we presume to care for others if we don't trust our abilities? Similarly, there are all sorts of human constructs in which we can trust. The manufacturers of our cars, for instance, are to be trusted for the vehicles' safety. And what of our hospitals? They are amongst the most sophisticated of human constructs. There are countless reasons to trust them, and to be grateful for them.

In verse 8, though, the Psalmist suggests we risk becoming like what we trust. So, if we put our trust in the powerful, we might hunger to be in control. If we put our trust in the rich, then we might lust after wealth.

trust in the LORD,  
their help and shield is he.

11 Ye that fear God,  
trust in the LORD,  
their help and shield he'll be.

15 O blessed are ye of the LORD,  
who made the earth and heav'n.

16 The heav'n, ev'n heav'ns, are  
GOD's, but he  
earth to men's sons hath giv'n.

17 The dead, nor who to silence go,  
GOD's praise do not record.

18 But henceforth we for ever will  
bless GOD. Praise ye the LORD.

So it is that this Psalm urges us to put our trust in the Lord, 'our help and shield' (verse 9). Moreover, if Christian people put their trust in God as God is in Jesus Christ, then they increase the possibility that they will grow in Christlikeness. That way, in the words of a URC Prayer after Communion, our love is God's love 'reaching out into the life of the world'. Striving to make that sort of difference in this era of polarised politics is more than worthwhile. We should, though, make sure that we don't take the credit, but keep singing the beginning of the Psalm, 'Not unto us, Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take.'

#### Prayer

Lord, we trust you as you are in Jesus -  
that you regard us  
not according to our failure,  
but according to your forgiveness;  
not according to how we went astray,  
but according to how you save us.

And may that love define our love for each other.

We seek no credit, no glory for ourselves,  
but rather for you and for you alone,  
through that same Jesus Christ, Amen.

#### Monday 23rd September

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

#### Romans 12: 3-8

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

#### Reflection

The issue of what food was considered 'proper' would have been very controversial in the Early Church. I can imagine the heated arguments in their equivalent of Church Meetings! Whilst this debate over correct ways of eating may not be familiar to us today, the problems differences of opinion can cause is not.

I've always valued that the URC Basis of Union specifically mentions respecting personal conviction and have seen this best in practice when my own congregation discussed supporting same sex marriage back in 2016. As important as these major debates are, however, I don't think Paul was just talking about the 'big stuff'.

There is much in our church life that we can have an opinion on. Which songs we sing, which version of the Bible is used, all the way down to which biscuits are served with the coffee before or after the service. Whilst it is important to examine the way we do things (and indeed to overhaul them from time to time!), what Paul is cautioning against is something different. He is trying to ensure we don't use our own standpoint to judge the character of the people who hold a different view. There is the reminder that it is God, not us, who judges what is 'right'.

Of course, in practice it's never easy. Our principles are often long-held and anything that pressures us to allow even a little wiggle room can cause us to react in ways that we aren't proud of.

This passage is a reminder that sometimes, in the midst of it all, we need to take a moment to consider the bigger picture – that what is important, above all else, whether in our churches or elsewhere, is a life in service to and praise of God.

#### Prayer

God of debate and discussion.



## Prayer

Father God, we do have a natural tendency to over-complicate things. We confess that we take your simple message of love and encase it in frills and wrappers that disguise its truth and distract us from its purpose. We pray that you will give us the wisdom to be simple, and the focus to be effective as we put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Saturday 28th September

Katrina Clifford, Elder, Trinity United Reformed Church, Wimbledon

Romans 14: 1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

## Reflection

This is such a rich passage with so many life-giving truths for our age:

- Not thinking of ourselves too highly.
- Remembering that we are one body; one humanity.
- Rejoicing in our diversity.

Driving around Croydon today, I will encounter drivers who believe they are the most important people in the world, with the most urgent tasks to fulfil and a divine right to get ahead of me. I, of course, never fall into this trap of thinking of myself so highly(!?). We all know that driving under the influence is illegal, but how about driving without sober judgement?

We can be fooled into thinking that some of us are lesser than others: migrants described as 'rats' in a tunnel, the disabled as 'invalid' (and on and on). Once we've judged and dehumanised our brothers and sisters, it is an easy step to blaming them, to hating them, to treating them terribly. Before we know where we are, we have rejected God's love for all. Our 'one body' is destroyed by 'my' body.

The image of the body with its many parts, is really helpful. The tiny homogeneous boxes of what society considers to be attractive, valuable and successful, are a lie. They suit the advertisers bottom-line, but they reduce us to a grey shadow of our colourful God-given selves.

God creates us as one people with unique gifts that can be used for good or ill. As we go about our lives today, consider:  
How often are we inflated by our reduction of others?  
How often are we deflated by society's raising of others?

## Prayer

Loving God,  
as we tread the fine line between rejoicing in your creation of us and the temptation to place ourselves higher than others, help us to celebrate the

wholeness of humanity and to use our uniqueness and diversity in such a way that we value others and believe in ourselves. Amen

## Tuesday 24th September

The Rev'd Ruth Dillon, Minister, Fleet URC and Beacon Hill Hindhead URC  
Wessex Synod

Romans 12: 9 - 21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### Reflection

Most of us have learned how to 'pretend' to love others, how to speak kindly, to avoid hurting other people's feelings and appear to take an interest in conversations. We maybe even skilled in pretending to ourselves to be moved with compassion, when we hear of other people's needs, or become indignant when we hear of injustice. But God calls us to real love and real compassion, and that takes hard work.

Today's verses summarize the real core of Christian living. The rhythm and verses are an echo of the Old Testament words written in Proverbs, together

In Jesus' name, who loved beyond limit. Amen.

## Friday 27th September

Alan Yates, Immediate Past Moderator of General Assembly and Convenor of the Education & Learning Committee.

Romans 13: 11 – 14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

### Reflection

I prepared this reflection a day after my birthday. I've reached that time of life where birthdays seem more of a countdown than a milestone! The sense of urgency to make the most of what's left is exacerbated by friends' talk of bucket lists and *carpe diem*. Paul also conveys a sense of urgency in his words in Romans 13 as there was an expectation that the Second Coming was imminent, and was getting closer by the day ... and so we are urged to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ'.

It appears that the practical teaching given to converts in the Early Church was designed to be easily memorised, like a simple form of catechism. To 'put on' is one such memorable catchphrase which encouraged early Christians to behave like, or copy, Jesus. Out of interest, and remembering my little grey catechism I had as a boy growing up in the Catholic church, I searched for the latest catechism. This is no longer a document meant for easy memorization: it is 1425 pages long! Let us retain and enjoy the simplicity of Paul's message, which after all is credited with initiating Augustine's conversion. Go on, put on the Lord Jesus Christ again, before the countdown ends!

yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

## Reflection

With Jesus, people wondered which elements of the Law through which Israel lived in covenant together with God were the most important. Jesus drew out two essentials; love God and love your neighbour (St Matthew 22:35-40). Now Paul takes the second of those and uses it to sum up all of the commandments. Love takes priority and acts as the ultimate proof of holy and righteous living. In love all else is fulfilled. It's a theme he echoes so powerfully in 1 Corinthians 13. Discipleship finds its deepest demonstration in pure love. Of all the Holy Spirit's gifts, love reigns supreme.

There is so much beauty here, so much demand, so much possibility. Paul follows Jesus in letting the Law become small enough to sum up in a few words, and simultaneously so big that it embraces everything and everyone. We discover our true vocation as the children of God to be love. Paul begins this little passage speaking of what we 'owe'. We should owe nothing and yet, because our obligation becomes love, we will live with an unpayable debt. For love embraces everyone and means giving to everyone everything they might need to flourish, doing no wrong to others, living gently with all.

Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018 caused the stir it did, perhaps, because he took the world's hand and dove into the depths of love. He invited us to delight in love's power. We can. We can let love define us, our churches and our impact upon creation. We must. We must let love transform us, from the inside out, daily. No bold initiative, no project, no scheme, no programme, can top what God will do when we let love define and reveal our discipleship.

## Prayer

In love's name you came amongst us, God who gives us all.  
In love's name you claimed us as your own;  
revealed your will, caught us up into your way.  
Now you give us another day.  
Let love be our gift to receive and give;  
love of ourselves, love of all we meet, love of creation's fragile glory.

with the Sermon on the Mount; a list of do's and don'ts for the early Christian convert.

Christians are not exempt from the pressures and stresses of daily living; however, Paul reminds us of the qualities that sets us apart as Christians.. These qualities more than ever, still hold true for us today in the 21st century. We live in an age of litigation, lawsuits, incessant demands for legal rights, political unrest, broken promises, and broken relationships and Paul's demands seem impossible for us to live by. A sceptic would say they are!

However what holds this portion of Romans together is the commitment to Love. We often pride ourselves in recognising the person that is not genuine, who utters eloquent words, yet are empty and shallow. The context can vary, but the reflection of true love and honesty can shine from the heart and eyes of the hearer and the speaker. We cannot fool God!

We think that the letter of Romans is all about doctrine, or justification by faith. Here, though, as Paul is beginning to head toward the conclusion of the letter, we see once again that the Christian life for him is all about faith working through love.

Let love be genuine!

## Prayer

Lord, who said it is easy being a Christian?  
It takes a lot of hard work and determination,  
and yes we often fail at the first hurdle.  
However....Rejoice !  
For your love for us never falters,  
is always steadfast;  
Your faithfulness for us never diminishes,  
is always strong;  
Your compassion for us, never wanes,  
is always constant;.

In each sacred moment,  
May the prism of God's love illuminate our lives.  
Now and always. Shalom

## Wednesday 25th September

Walt Johnson, Elder, Wilbraham St Ninian's URC, Chorlton, Manchester.

Romans 13: 1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

### Reflection

Civil law affects every aspect of our daily lives: the height of our neighbour's hedge, the Highway Code, tax obligations, knife-crime, domestic abuse... Civil law and punishments for infractions have been, and are, part of every society.

For the most part, we are probably glad of the civil order we have in the UK. Elsewhere, good people suffer the injustices of corrupt officials and discriminatory laws.

This passage from Romans does not occur in the three-year Sunday Lectionary cycle; nevertheless, throughout history, these verses have been abused to coerce people into obedience to unjust regimes. Ironically, in this letter, Paul was most likely writing about the Roman authorities, the very same by whose laws he was executed around 10 years later.

The Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the URC makes clear the distinction of government of Christ's Church and the government of the state, and it goes on to say: "Civil authorities are called to serve God's will of justice

and peace for all humankind, and to respect the rights of conscience and belief."

How can we respond to this? Jesus says to us: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world." His call to us is to get involved!

Those involved in law and order are required to swear an oath upon enrolment. As a magistrate, our Judicial Oath includes these words: "I will do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this realm, without fear or favour, affection or ill will."

What else can we do? We can pray. Pray for the police who bravely put themselves in harm's way. Pray for the judicial office holders who sit in judgement: judges, magistrates, jurors and tribunals' judiciary. Pray for probation and prison officers who work to rehabilitate and reform offenders. Pray for victim support workers.

### Prayer

Lord God, Your Word alone lights the paths of justice.  
We pray for all who administer justice...  
For all whose profession or expertise is the law...  
For the police and all who sustain order in our land...  
May they fulfil their duties to the good of all people.  
Grant them Your Spirit of discernment and of love.  
We hold before You the victims of crime and injustice.

O Lord, hear our prayer: and let our cry go unto You. Amen.

## Thursday 26th September

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Principal, Westminster College, Cambridge

Romans 13: 8 - 10

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as