



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

24 - 29 MAY 2021

INTRODUCTION

This week, and for the next few weeks, the NT readings set for Morning Prayer are from Paul's letter to the Romans. The readings are generally quite long and, because Paul packs so much into almost every sentence, we'll need to be more selective than usual in the choice of topics to focus on. As usual the text in bold type should give an indication of the day's Thought. Much of Paul's writing addresses the traditional attitude of the Jewish people towards the Law and the implications of their understanding for the Gentiles who were hearing about Jesus and his message for the first time. Rather than spend too much time unpicking the detailed arguments, we'll try to work out how Paul's general approach remains relevant to us as followers of Jesus 2000 years on.

MONDAY - Romans 1:1-17

¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ **the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ 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,** ⁵ 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, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ 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.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Thought for the day

One of the remarkable things that happened to the earliest Christians in the years after Pentecost was their rapid development of ideas about Jesus and his relationship to God. Right at the start of this letter, written around 55AD, Paul summarises some of these beliefs (v3-4), perhaps quoting an existing creed: Jesus was descended from David (fulfilling OT prophecies eg 2 Samuel 7:11-14 and Isaiah 11:1-5); he was God's Son 'with power' (not just a son of God, but the Son of God), as assured by the resurrection and confirmed by the Holy Spirit; he is God's Messiah (=Christ); he is Lord (appropriating Caesar's title). We perhaps take all these claims for granted, but they were radical in the context of a man only some 20 years earlier being executed as the commonest of criminals. And they underlie Paul's own beliefs and the conclusions he draws from them - especially in relation to his message to the Gentiles (v5-6,8,14-15,16).

TUESDAY - Romans 1:18-32

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ **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;** ²¹ **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.** ²² **Claiming to be wise, they became fools;** ²³ **and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images** resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² 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.

Thought for the day

Now Paul reflects on God, writing about him in a typically Jewish way: his attributes, though real from the beginning, are visible only in his creation - the things he has made (v20). The evidence was there but humanity failed to honour or thank him (v21), instead relying on themselves (v21-22) and, even worse, on images and idols (v23). The rest of the passage gives examples of the kind of behaviour which resulted from worshipping the creature not the Creator (v25). Perhaps we consider ourselves immune to all this - perhaps we have never done any of the things that Paul detests so strongly. But can we say honestly that we do honour God and thank him for everything he has given us? Or that we never allow anything to stand in the way of our relationship with God?

WEDNESDAY - Romans 2:1-16

¹ 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. ² You say, 'We know that God's judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.' ³ 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? ⁴ 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? ⁵ 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. ⁶ For he will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷ **to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life;** ⁸ **while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.** ⁹ There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Thought for the day

The J-word - judgement - is hateful to almost everyone nowadays: to secular society because it implies what it says: judging, forming a view on what is right or wrong, though instinctively most people seem to retain a sense of which is which. But Christians also fight shy of the idea, focusing instead on grace and forgiveness. These are indeed powerful gifts, but they only have effect once we recognise that we need them, when we judge ourselves to have done wrong things. Confessing our sins with the intention of reforming for the future puts us into Paul's first category of those who will obtain eternal life (v7), precisely because God's grace is available to us. But 'if we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves' and put ourselves beyond the scope of grace (v8). It is hard to accept that we are less than perfect, but once we have formed that judgement of and for ourselves, the way lies open for us to seek forgiveness and claim the grace of which we are assured.

THURSDAY - Romans 2:17-29

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God ¹⁸ and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, ²¹ you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'

²⁵ Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. ²⁹ 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.

Thought for the day

After the J-word yesterday, lurking behind today's reading, though never articulated as such, is the H-word - hypocrisy. Like many other unattractive traits, it's so easy to see it in others, so hard to see it in ourselves. Paul knew from personal experience how dedicated many Jews were to keeping the Law, which they believed was all that was necessary to receive God's approbation. But, Paul says, ticking boxes is not enough (v17-23) - what's important is what is in our hearts (v29). We've heard many politicians and others saying, 'I've done nothing wrong', often when trying to defend behaviour which is at best dubious. What they mean is that they haven't broken any rules. Even if that is true it's not at all the same as having done nothing wrong. But probably politicians are not the only ones who overlook the broader implications of what they do. Christians mustn't be sucked into such insidious attitudes. Paul's arguments about the Law and circumcision may seem very distant to us, but the issues he tackles are still around and still causing trouble.

FRIDAY - Romans 3:1-20

1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³ What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, 'So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging.'

⁵ 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.) ⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ 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.

⁹ 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, ¹⁰ as it is written: 'There is no one who is righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.' ¹³ 'Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of

vipers is under their lips.' ¹⁴ 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.' ¹⁵ 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery are in their paths, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.' ¹⁸ 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'

¹⁹ 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. 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.

Thought for the day

It perhaps comes as a surprise that, after roundly criticising the attitude of Jews within the Christian church in yesterday's reading, Paul now speaks highly of the Jewish heritage of which he was once proud to be a part (v1-2). The Jewish nation was singled out by God as his special people, and God remained faithful to them, in spite of the unfaithfulness of some (v3-4). He then reverts to his earlier theme of judgement, asserts God's role as the just judge (v6), and that all people, Jews and gentiles alike, are 'under the power of sin' (v9). For us the ultimate proof of God's faithfulness to humanity was his sending of Jesus, reinforced by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and down the ages. Given our own failures and shortcomings, we should be so grateful that God's judgement is not only just but merciful - that's grace, not entitlement.

SATURDAY - Romans 3:21-31

²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ 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; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Thought for the day

God's justice is part of all that is right and good about him, all bound up in the rather tricky word righteousness, so often confused in our thinking with self-righteousness, which is almost its precise opposite. God's righteousness was disclosed (v21) or shown (v25) by Jesus. It is through our faith in him (v22) that we are put right with God (justified, another difficult word). Verse 28 is the classic summary of Paul's teaching. We can never have a right relationship with God through our own efforts (works), but only through our faith in Jesus; and such faith will make us want to follow his way and do what is right - in Paul's terms 'uphold the law' (v31).