



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

14 - 19 JUNE 2021

INTRODUCTION

We continue with readings from Paul's letter to the Romans. As usual the text in bold type will give a focus for the day's Thought. Much of Paul's writing interrogates the Jewish heritage and draws on texts from the Hebrew scriptures (OT). There must have been enough Jewish Christians in the church at Rome to explain this background to the Gentiles who would have had little if any knowledge of the Jewish background. Whenever we can, we'll try to work out how Paul's general approach remains relevant to us as followers of Jesus 2000 years on.

MONDAY - Romans 9:1-18

¹ I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— ² **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.** ³ **For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.** ⁴ **They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;** ⁵ **to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.**

⁶ It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. ⁹ For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.' ¹⁰ Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac. ¹¹ Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, ¹² not by works but by his call) she was told, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' ¹³ As it is written, 'I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.'

¹⁴ What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses.

Thought for the day

Now Paul turns back to his earlier theme of the fate of his own people, the Jews. They remain God's chosen people, as demonstrated by all his gifts to them (v4-5). And Paul would sacrifice everything he holds dear, even his own faith in Christ, to reconcile them to Christ (v3). By writing this he is indeed following in the footsteps of Jesus who gave himself up for all humanity. Thus Paul shows his willingness to take up his own cross (Mark 8:34). What might we be prepared to sacrifice for Jesus?

TUESDAY - Romans 9:19-33

¹⁹ You will say to me then, 'Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' ²⁰ But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, 'Why have you made me like this?' ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; ²³ and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his

glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? ²⁵ As indeed he says in Hosea, 'Those who were not my people I will call "my people", and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved".' ²⁶ 'And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people", there they shall be called children of the living God.'

²⁷ And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; ²⁸ for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively.' ²⁹ And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah.'

³⁰ What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; ³¹ but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. ³² Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone, ³³ as it is written, 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

Thought for the day

And so, via further reflections on God's relationship with the Jewish people and a variety of OT texts, Paul returns to the tensions between faith and works. He recognises a terrible irony here: the God-fearing Jews, trying so hard to comply with every last requirement of the law (v32), have been trumped by the formerly ignorant Gentiles; these pagans achieved a right relationship with God (righteousness) through faith, which works could never do (v32). Once again we are challenged to consider where we stand between the two poles of faith and works.

WEDNESDAY - Romans 10:1-10

¹ Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵ Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' ⁶ 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) ⁷ or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? **'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.**

Thought for the day

The quotation in verse 8 ('The word is near you ...') is from Deuteronomy 30:14: there Moses is encouraging the Israelites to make a choice between life and prosperity, and death and destruction (30:15); 'choose life' he urges (30:19). Paul wants his hearers to make the same choice, based on their recognition of Jesus as Lord, and belief that God raised him from the dead (v9). The word preached to us (v8) is the word believed by us and the word waiting to be passed on (v10). As so often this raises the question as to whether we are ready enough to tell others about our faith and why it means so much to us.

THURSDAY - Romans 10:11-21

¹¹ The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' ¹² 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. ¹³ For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

¹⁴ 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? ¹⁵ 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!' ¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says,

'Lord, who has believed our message?' ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ 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.'
²⁰ 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.'
²¹ But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'

Thought for the day

The OT quote (v13) is from Joel 2:32 and is part of a longer passage referring to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Peter used the same passage - incorporating it as a key element of his Pentecost Day sermon (Acts 2:21). Both uses show how a prophecy originally applied to God has been appropriated by early Christian writers to describe Jesus, who Paul describes as 'Lord of all' (v12). Paul's emphasis, not present in the original, is on everyone - Jew and Gentile alike. And us, of course. This is one of those very simple messages that cuts through so much complexity. Perhaps we need to discover it afresh: call on the Lord ... be saved.

FRIDAY - Romans 11:1-12

¹ 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. ² 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? ³ 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.'
⁴ But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'
⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ 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.'
⁹ And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling-block and a retribution for them; ¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and keep their backs for ever bent.'

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

Thought for the day

As Paul continues to wrestle with the reluctance of the Jewish people generally to accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord, he takes some comfort in the existence once before of a small remnant of his people who remained faithful to God when the rest of the nation turned away from him (see 1 Kings 19). Reflecting on this historical event leads Paul towards his remarkable conclusion in verses 11 to 12. He suggests that the current situation is recoverable (a stumble only, not a fall), that his own successful mission to the Gentiles will provoke a reaction by his people, and that they will join the Gentiles. Ironically this turns on its head the long-held Jewish tradition that their faithfulness to God would bring the whole world to belief in him - now it is Gentile belief in Jesus which will lead the Jewish people to the truth. Sadly that has not happened yet. Does this undermine the confidence we can place in Paul's witness? To use his own phrase - by no means (v1 and elsewhere throughout Romans) - we should instead admire his persistence and optimism in the face of a situation of such pain to him.

SATURDAY - Romans 11:13-24

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry ¹⁴ in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' ²⁰ 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. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. ²² **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.** ²³ **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.** ²⁴ 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.

Thought for the day

Paul turns to the Gentiles in the church and offers them a metaphor, similar to Jesus' true vine (John 15:1-8), of trees, branches and God's role as gardener (v21). He urges the non-Jews to respond to God's kindness already shown to them with kindness towards the majority of the Jewish people who are now cut off from God by their failure to believe in Jesus (v22-23). Subsequent relationships between Christians and Jews have shown Paul's hope to be woefully misplaced, to the lasting shame of the church. More generally there is a tendency for those who have strong beliefs to look down on those who don't share them, or don't share them enough. How humble is our own faith? How keen are we to see others 'grafted in'?

JRE / 12.5.21