

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 6 JULY 2014
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Acts 22: 1-22; Romans 1: 1-7

“Small and Humble”

In the coming weeks, we will be looking at Paul’s letter to the Romans. Parts of it were on the lectionary while we were busy reading Jonah, and I felt it would be a pity if we missed out on something as fascinating as the apostle Paul and this letter, which has played such an important role in the systematic theology of the Western Church. The likes of Augustin, Luther, Calvin and Karl Barth cited this letter as a life changer for their theological thinking. In contemporary Christianity, however, especially on the more liberal, progressive side of the Church, both Paul and his writings tend to be regarded with suspicion. They have a reputation for being difficult, bigoted, hung up on sex and anti-women. Like it or not, Paul’s letters are the oldest Christian writings we have today, and they have had a profound influence on everything that followed, including the gospels. Reading and studying these writings is getting as close to what lies at the root of our faith as we will ever be able to get. Today we will start with the first seven verses of the first chapter, where Paul introduces himself. Alongside it, we will read Luke’s account in Acts, where Paul introduces himself after his arrest in Jerusalem to a Roman Tribune. This introduction in Acts, projected back in time by Luke, shows much stronger anti-Jewish tendencies than in Paul’s own writings, which reminds us that in the beginning, in the most ancient of sources, Judaism and Christianity were much closer than they later became, and that Paul was not the one who initiated the “parting of the ways”.

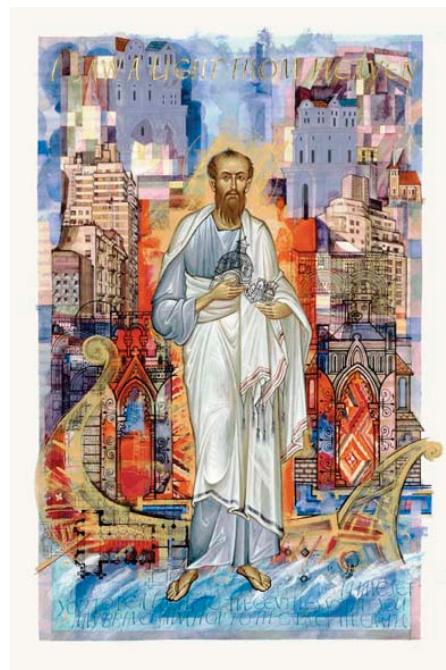
Sermon

So here we are, at the beginning of a letter that Paul writes to the Christians in Rome. The Christian Community in Rome is not one Paul has founded. It was there very early on, even before Paul became active as a Christian missionary and preacher. There is evidence that there were Christians living in Rome as early as the year 49, making it one of the oldest Christian Communities outside Jerusalem.

Rome, at the time, was an international hub, and it is not surprising that Christianity arrived there as early as it did. There would have been travellers, tourists, sailors, traders and mercenaries from Jerusalem, sharing their new faith with friends and business contacts in Rome. After Stephen was martyred, there may even have been Christian refugees who sought refuge in the relative anonymity of a large city like Rome.

Around the year 57, the approximate date of Paul writing this letter, there is a large, flourishing and very diverse Christian community in Rome. There are Jews, some traditional and committed to a strict obedience to the law; others more liberal and, what we would call today, secularised. Gentiles had joined the congregation, some of which had been Jewish adherents, or even circumcised converts to Judaism before they became Christians, and others who had converted directly from paganism. Each group added their own particular perspectives, ideas and interests to the mix. Apart from these differences in religious background and faith practices, there were also huge differences in ethnic background, education levels, class, status and wealth. Rome was a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic melting pot, and that diversity was reflected in the members of the Christian community.

One of the main issues for Christians at the time, anywhere, was the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and the question to what extent Christians needed to follow Jewish law as part of their faith



practice. Initially, new Christians had been mainly recruited through the network of Jewish synagogues and communities all over the Roman Empire. There were 48 people in the apostle convent in Jerusalem who had had no prior relationship to Judaism, and were deemed acceptable converts. The issue of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity had become acute everywhere.

An intense debate ensued, and don't be mistaken: Christians from non-Jewish backgrounds were often more fanatical about following the law than people of Jewish descent. Just imagine: You've converted to Judaism, have let yourself and/or family members be circumcised; you've given up all sorts of important things to be able to follow the law (converting to Judaism could mean losing your job and status in society); and then someone tells you this was not necessary and you can now join this new Jewish sect without doing any of those things.

More than any other, this was the group who liked to emphasise that Jesus had been a Jew, and that to follow in Jesus' footsteps, his followers needed to convert to Judaism first. They were inclined to see Christianity as a continuation and fulfilment of the journey of the Jewish people with God.

On the other hand, there were also people of Jewish descent who had not been actively practicing Judaism, even before they became Christians, and had let themselves be completely assimilated into their Greco Roman context. People to whom resubmitting themselves to Jewish law and practices felt like going backwards instead of forwards.

At that time in Rome, in Early Christianity, there was a lot more at stake than a strictly theological debate on the merits of Jewish law and the tenets of a Christian way of life. The outcome of the debate affected people's lives in significant ways, culturally, religiously, collectively and individually.

I see similarities with Christianity today. There is the middle way of the old institutional Churches like ours, where left, right, traditional, evangelical, liberal, social justice activists and more inwardly-oriented Christians try to live and practice their faith side by side in some kind of harmony. Groups to the left and the right are more explicit about where they stand and are more defined in what they expect of their followers. That old question, that built-in tension that has been at the heart of our faith ever since the beginning, will surface again. The relationship between living by grace or according to the law, between liberty and obedience, faith and action, hard work and ultimate trust.

Wherever we, as Christians, come together, these tensions surface. In our Church Council, Elders meetings, synod meetings, where congregations try to amalgamate, where ecumenical ventures are embarked upon, this old tension will always be part of the discussion. Tradition or renewal, outreach or building our own faith and community, worship or action, they are all part of that same old tension. And exactly like in good old Rome, cultural differences, ethnic backgrounds, history, traditions, wealth, prejudices and age-old habits and superstitions all come into play when we try to resolve these issues.

That's the environment Paul introduces himself into with carefully chosen words. That tension, that diversity, that melting pot of opinions, culture, faith, and conflicting interests that is not unlike the situation in our own time and in our own Church.

In those first seven verses in his introduction, Paul very clearly positions himself, successively addressing the question of his authority, his role in the Church, the role and the person of Jesus, the content of Paul's gospel, and the nature and role of the congregation in Rome. He further expands on words and concepts later on in the letter, but here, at the beginning of the letter, they are summarised to introduce himself. They don't know him in Rome. They may have heard of him, but they don't know him. So it is important for Paul to grab them from the word go and make it clear, before they can lose interest, why he believes they should listen to him and read his letter.

Nothing has changed in that respect. Research shows if you don't hook your audience in the first 30 seconds of a youtube video, a ted talk, a sermon or a lecture, you might as well forget the rest. And Paul knew this.

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

A servant, a slave, a bondsman of Christ Jesus. It is a title that has been used for prophets like Moses and Elijah, for David the King, and by Jesus himself to express absolute surrender and devotion to God. Called to be an apostle. Yes, just like the other twelve. He refers to the story about the 180 degree turn his life has taken on the Road to Damascus, where Jesus himself commissioned him to go to the nations and bring them the gospel.

Set apart, like Israel from amongst the nations, so is Paul from amongst his people. From the very first Christians even, he has been set apart to bring the gospel to the nations.

That's Paul. Not a rabbi with a message, but a subordinate of the Lord. Not one of the many Christians who, at that time, travelled from synagogue to synagogue, and from congregation to congregation to share the gospel, but someone who has received his commission to venture outside from the hands of the Lord himself. He is an exceptional case, which is what Paul is trying to say. He has more authority than the average preacher presenting themselves to the congregation in Rome would have been able to muster.

His gospel, he goes on to say, is grounded in the promises of God in the Jewish scriptures. Christ, a son of David, as well as a son of God. Not one of the many gods and demi-gods that figure in the Greco-Roman firmament. Not someone like Heracles who was born of a virgin, conceived by a god, a man with superhuman powers, a hero who, in the end, is accepted into the circle of the gods on Mount Olympus.

No, says Paul, Jesus is a human being rooted in the family of David and the traditions of the Old Testament. In him, all the ideas about what true humanity looks like according to the Jewish scriptures come together and take shape. It is only through that Spirit of holiness, through his life, that he becomes THE son of God. It is through him that I became an apostle, says Paul. He has given me the authority to preach his gospel and be who I am. To bring about obedience of faith among the nations, including yourselves, for the sake of his name.

Obedience. What Paul is talking about here is no passive submission to authority. This is not about discipline, about rules that have to be obeyed, about a hierarchy of people who tell others what to do. No, this is about answering a call, about a response, about a reaction to the gospel, about implementation of what is heard, about actions that follow after people have adopted the way of Jesus as their own. In his letter, he comes back to this many times: faith, and following Jesus, is not about passive compliance, but it is about active engagement.

And finally, after 6 verses of introduction of himself and his mission, Paul greets his audience, the Christian Community in Rome, as people from amongst the nations, God's beloved, with a call to be Saints.

Not holier than thou Saints, but holy because of the space they occupy in the mind of God. Holy because they have been invited into the circle of holiness by God. This is another concept that reoccurs several times later on in the letter, and I will talk about that a little more next time.

He finishes his introduction with words that have been used ever since as a greeting amongst Christians, even to the present day.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ....”

In this greeting, Israel and the nations are welded together, summarising Paul's theology and mission in under 15 words. Grace, Charis, the international, general greeting used amongst people of every race and faith in the Greco-Roman world at the time, and peace, eirene, shalom, which was the greeting used by Jewish people wherever they went.

Grace, God's good will, God's favour, and shalom, abundance of life and wellbeing in every sense of the word, personally and collectively, be with you.

Grace and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just any grace or peace, not just any good will, favour, sense of wellbeing or peace, but the specific grace and the specific peace of the gospel,

the grace and peace following the way of Jesus. Peace and grace, a sense of wellbeing and wholeness that is marked by the profound justice, righteousness, compassion and care for the world and all its inhabitants that the scriptures speak about, seeking to envelop all creation in an order that is governed only by love and care for one another.

Paul's name means small, humble. He presents himself at the beginning of this letter as someone who has been called, who has been set apart, as a proclaimer of a faith with consequences. Bringer of a gospel of a Christ who is on the one hand deeply rooted in the Jewish scriptures and the Jewish prophetic traditions, but is also, at the same time, on a level with the God above all other gods.

Reading his introduction word for word, we discover a man and world not unlike us and our own. He was a man who lived in a multicultural, multi-ethnic world full of seekers. He was part of a Church that struggled to reconcile tradition and renewal, old rules and new freedom. They were people who wondered about the identity of Jesus, human or divine, man or God, like us or not like us? Who was trying to develop a view on what Church is, in all its diversity, called to be? What does it mean to be Christ's body in the world? They were trying to find the balance between faith and action, seeking to define what, in the end, is at the root of our identity as Christian people. They were struggling, to a large extent, with the same questions we struggle with today, in our life as a community, as well as in our personal faith.

In the coming weeks, we will explore what answers this first century apostle came up with, and where they might be helpful to us, as we struggle in our own day with issues that are very similar to the ones that were at the top of the Christian agenda then.

Amen.