

Holy Trinity 2nd August 2020

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 9:1-5 p.1135

Matt. 14:13-21 – Feeding of the 5000

Last week I referred to what I wrongly believed to be John Stott's observation that Romans 8 is like the Himalayas in the book of Romans and that verse 28 could be seen as being like Mt Everest. This week I tried to tie down the quote. Rather unsuccessfully. In fact, it seems many have used similar analogies. Stephen Sizer, for example, says, 'If Romans is like the Himalayas of the Bible, chapter 8 is the Everest, the highest peak of all.' I don't know who made the analogy initially. I want us to hold that imagery for a moment.

Paul has climbed theologically to the top of Mount Everest. Chapters 1-8 are a sustained theological argument – explaining what God has done throughout history – through the Jewish people – and ultimately – through Christ. Paul is writing this about 30 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. He is still reflecting on the extraordinary events of Jesus' life. Above all – he's been reflecting on how that ties in with the beliefs he held as a Pharisee and supremely with the prophecies of what we call the OT – what he'd have simply called the Scriptures.

And it's here that he is now looking out at the vista. He sees a church that comprises both Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles, of course, being anyone who isn't a Jew. He's profoundly aware that he has been given a radical task – summed up in the words God spoke to Ananias in Acts 9:15-16: 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'

So here in chapter 9:1-5, Paul begins his reflections on the Jewish people – in the light of what he now believes about Jesus. There is something that caused Paul considerable concern: Verses 2-3: 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel...'. Amazing and difficult stuff. Paul – a Jew – now converted to Christianity felt so passionately about the Good News that Jesus was and felt so lovingly for the people amongst whom he'd been raised and educated says effectively, that he'd be willing to lose his own salvation, if that were necessary for them to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

Of course, he's using the language of rhetoric. But it does raise a question for us. How passionately do we feel for the lost of our world? Perhaps the church has become a little too keen to avoid confrontation or embarrassment. Whilst I certainly don't agree with many of their beliefs, I do have a respect for the Jews and the Mormons for their persistence in knocking on doors. Sometimes the church too has been more keen to stick knives in each other's backs than in really ensuring that Jesus is understood to be Good News to the world.

Many of the Jewish leaders of Paul's day were now his enemies. In 2 Corinthians 11, in a section entitled in the NIV, 'Paul Boasts About His Sufferings', Paul writes, 'Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? so am I.' (2 Cor. 11:22) Yet in a few verses he writes, 'Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.' (2 Cor. 11:25) And a little later that he was 'in danger from my own countrymen'. (2 Cor. 11:26) The Acts of the Apostles gives many examples of Paul being unjustly arrested and condemned because of the Jewish leaders who were opposed to him.

He had every reason to reject them and even hate them. And yet he chose to love them. He points to them as a great symbol of God's purpose for the world.

Verses 4-5: 'Theirs is the adoption as sons...'. Paul's point being – what is now true of Christians (Rom. 8:15) was true of the Israelites in the past.

'theirs the divine glory' – no doubt thinking back to the glory that we are told filled the temple: 'When the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple.' (1 Kings 8:11) – and other means by which God's presence had been made known.

'theirs... the covenants' – the special agreements between God and human beings have been established with the Israelites

'theirs... the receiving of the law' – perhaps especially the Ten Commandments – the foundation for a just and caring society. By 'law' – the Jew meant a number of things – sometimes it was a catch all for the first 5 books of the Bible – in Hebrew *The Torah* – *The Law*. Summed up by Jesus as 'to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... [and to] love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matt. 22:37-39)

'theirs... the temple worship' – the foundation of all worship – preserved especially in the Psalms.

'theirs... the promises' – I guess that means that ultimately 'God wins'. Isaiah 66:22 reads: 'As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me... so will your name and descendants endure.'

And finally, 'Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ...'. Effectively, the history of Israel is the history of Christ. Both Matthew 1 and Luke 3 spell out that genealogy.

This brings us to the final phrase of today's reading. 'Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.' You'll notice a footnote in the NIV offers an alternative translation. This is because the Greek of NT days did not use punctuation. And a full-stop after Christ – alters the meaning somewhat. It could read, 'Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is over all. [Full-stop]. God be for ever praised.' Or even, 'Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ. God who is over all be for ever praised.' In these two foot-noted translations the meaning is that 'Christ is the descendent of the patriarchs – let's give thanks to God.' But in translation in the NIVs main text – which to be honest better fits the grammar of the text – Christ, the human descendent of the patriarchs is equated with God. All three are true.

If you're hesitant, as some scholars are, that Paul as a Jew would so clearly identify the human Jesus with God – you're left really with the footnotes. But undoubtedly Paul did see that equation. In Col. 1:15 he writes, 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...'. Or Phil. 2:6 where Paul describes Jesus as 'being in very nature God'.

Whatever else is the case – Paul sees many good reasons for being thankful to the Jewish race. He thinks positively about his persecutors. Many a conflict in the Christian church would have been less severe if we followed Paul's example – and gave praise where praise is due. How different things might be if we could look at those with whom we disagree and see them as people loved by God and perhaps doing what we are unable to do. As a wise Christian once said to me, 'I try not to criticise those who are doing badly, what I am not doing at all.'

As Paul looked down from the Everest of Romans 8 – He saw what an extraordinary work God had done through the Jewish people. No longer was he willing to look at them through his own feelings and perspective, but rather through the perspective of God – and give thanks.