

PENTECOST 15

SERMON PREACHED BY REV'D GLENN MAYTUM

While we have been working our way through Matthew's gospel, this year, we have also, since March, been reading Paul's letter to the Romans, week-by-week.

Today, as you can see from our second reading, we are now up to chapter 14.

This is an interesting letter, I think, as St Paul is writing a letter of introduction for himself as "Apostle to the Gentiles". I think it is good to, from time to time, remind ourselves of the story of the book of scripture so that the context of our readings make more sense.

As we know, St Paul became quite the missionary/evangelist. Seen by some today as controversial, Paul was a highly-intellectual, rabbinically-educated Jew who became the great exponent of the Christian faith and who wrote powerful statements of Christian doctrine.

Following his conversion he had, by now, preached in Arabia and Jerusalem, Syria and Cilicia, Cyprus and Galatia, Macedonia and Illyricum, Ephesus and Corinth. Now that he had completed his church-planting work in the east of the Roman Empire, where he had been hounded out of synagogues, beaten with rods, flogged, stoned, jailed, endangered by riots, robbers and thugs, still wishing to proclaim the gospel message he was planning to take his work west, to Spain (after a visit to Jerusalem) and he wanted to use Rome as his starting place.

Rome, itself, had become a difficult place for the Jews and, subsequently, the Christians. There was friction and misunderstanding between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Both sides were stubborn. The Christians had formed themselves into house churches.

Suetonius wrote about Jewish disturbances in Rome, probably due to the influence of the Christians, which led to Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome in AD49. But, on Claudius' death many Jews and Christians felt safe to return (at least until AD64 when the persecution under Nero commenced, following the fire).

In Scripture we have many types of writing, like history, poetry, teaching, didactic fiction, and this is **a letter**, not an essay on any particular theological point (although justification by faith gets a good run). It is an introduction of himself to the churches in Rome, explaining the gospel he has preached and seeking to spend time in fellowship with them, before being sent by them to Spain.

Paul was introducing himself as Apostle to the Gentiles. We see in this letter how his mind was working: it is all over the place!

Despite having experienced murderous hostility from some Jews and strong dispute from some Christians, he chose to set out the Gospel he had been preaching and had refined, after his time with the Galatians.

And, on the past few Sundays and today we see him listing details of Christian conduct (chapters 12-15), important for the context of what was happening in Rome.

So, we have already read verses we all know:

-present your bodies as a living sacrifice (12:1); let love be genuine (12:9); live in harmony with one another (12:16); be subject to the governing authorities (13:1); love is the fulfilling of the law (13:10).

And, today Chapter 14:1-14, he is making the point that people have turned their faith into a works exercise: in other words, if people do certain things/eat certain things/observe certain days, then they will become God's people.

The inner, established group had set the boundaries. It was THEY who had the correct answers. They said they knew what was correct to eat, or drink, what holy days to observe. THEY had built a religion of works.

Unless people followed what the inner group required, were they even Christians?

But, no one is able to keep the Law perfectly.

Paul had already made it clear that Christianity is an inward, spiritual life to be lived before God, rather than an outward, literal life to be lived before man.

I think we can see this even today. There are those who see themselves or certain institutions as the font of all knowledge. Alternate, independent thought is rejected.

People new to the place or from outside a particular area are criticised because they do not fit the mould of the particular, inner group. I think it's easy to see schools and companies and residential areas and political administrations which fit this idea. And, it can happen in the church, as well.

St Paul may have been writing to the Romans in AD57 but this letter is relevant to the church even in 2020. What to believe? How to interpret scripture? What customs and rituals to discard? What words cannot be used? What can or cannot be worn?

The Puritans in the 16th century had a go at making society and religion conform to their narrow, law-driven view of scripture. And, they failed.

It was this very idea of an outward, visible show of religious works that ultimately led to the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of Paul.

A human's natural way to please God seems to be to want to earn God's favour.

But, Paul says it is the power of the message of the Gospel of Jesus that changes peoples' behaviour.

Rather than a religion of works, today's reading shows we have to remember that we need to cast ourselves upon God for His mercy, to live a life of repentance and faith in God's kindness.