

Be transformed by God's gift of grace and freedom

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Romans – *dipping our toe in: God's love is given, not earned.*
Pent + 4A Romans 6.1b-11 and Matt 10.21-39.

Often in the media or in a courtroom, somebody will be quoted to make it sound as if they've said something shocking and incriminating. But when they demonstrate what the actual context was, it turns out that they've been badly misrepresented. Think of that woman where carefully selected excerpts from her diary saw her wrongly convicted of murdering her children.

Context is serious business; it's really important when it comes to interpreting words accurately. For example, in the Gospel passage we just heard, it could sound as if Jesus is prescribing the suffering that must happen to any disciple who's out evangelising. But really, it's not saying that. These sayings have actually been written down by a Christian community which is experiencing pushback – persecution and alienation from their families – and they're remembering sayings of Jesus which help them come to terms with these difficulties. It happened to him, so it's only logical that it could also happen to those who are doing the same work as Jesus did. But it's not necessarily going to happen to everyone. Mission isn't necessarily proven to be genuine by the experiences of persecution and family breakdown. But it's good to be warned of the possibility. Again, context is really important to accurate interpretation.

But I'm not preaching on the Gospel today. I'm starting a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Romans. We'll be hearing excerpts from this very important letter right through

until September. And hearing disembodied chunks of a complex argument – no context, and no exposition of it – seems to me to be unworthy of this letter. So let's embark on a journey through Romans, and let me start you off with a cheeky parallel bit of imaginary context to get us in the right headspace.

Imagine out of the blue one Sunday, ten strangers come and join this parish. It turns out they're the entire church council of a Seventh Day Adventist congregation. They've left it because of some dispute with their central church hierarchy. But they're committed Christians, and they're determined to be fully involved with their newly adopted community, and without delay.

As it happens, on their first Sunday, during the notices, a parish dinner is announced, and people are asked to volunteer to meet after Church to organize it. All ten come to the meeting, and the fun begins.

'No, no, no; it can't be on a Saturday.' ...

'But we've always...'

'What do you mean it can only be a vegetarian meal...!?'

And the fun continues.

A year or so later, again out of the blue, St John's receives a long, theological letter from a prominent evangelist. It's a pointed letter. She writes about how Christianity that's factional alienates people from God. There's a lot about Anglican-Adventist relations. (Has somebody told her something?) And at the end, she says she'll be coming to stay with us soon, and she'd like our support to fund her next mission.

This letter would be something like the Roman Christians' introduction to the apostle Paul was; his unexpected letter

from which we heard a reading just now. He knows a lot about them, and he's familiar with churches torn by factions. As a missionary and a church planter, Paul had to deal with tensions between rich and poor Christians, between Jews and Christians, pagans and Christians, and between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) factions in most of the churches he dealt with.

This was a particular issue in Rome. As well as internal issues between Jewish and Gentile Christians, there were major tensions between Synagogue and Church which were so public that ultimately they came to the Emperor's notice. In 49 CE, the Emperor Claudius proclaimed an edict expelling all Jews from Rome; all Jews, including the Christian ones.

This edict remained in force until Claudius' death in 54 CE. Then, finally, the Jews and the Jewish Christians were able to return home. But they would have come back to a very different type of church. While they were away, the Gentile Christian leadership would have set up a less synagogue-oriented style of community organization. (Byrne, *Romans* p.12)

This would have been very difficult for the returning Jewish Christians. They'd have wanted to re-claim their accustomed positions of leadership within the Church, and change things back to what they were used to – a synagogue style of religious practice.

And the Gentile Christians who'd stayed in Rome would have felt that the returning Jewish Christians were trying to *Judaize* the Church. They would have resisted that. It's very hard for different groups to accept each-other's customs, isn't it. Remember those imaginary Adventist newcomers. This very much shaped the way Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome?

After a greeting that reads like an impressive CV, ^(1.1-7) he thanks God for the famous community of faith he knows them to

be, and how long he's wanted to be with them. ^(1.8-15) Then he states the Gospel as this letter is going to present it – salvation is a free gift of God to Jews and Gentiles, received only by faith. ^(1.16-17)

We might ask, *salvation from what?* A quick glance at the headlines should make that pretty clear – human-induced climate catastrophe, species extinction, abuse of women, children, ethnic minorities, well over 100 m displaced persons.

Humanity is deeply sick, deeply alienated from reality, from each other and from God. Paul details the evidence from his own time, and from its ethical and cultural perspective, to say that all people, Jew and Gentile, fall short of God's standard. ^(1.18-3.20)

These are not easy words to hear; and they're not meant to be. Paul wants his readers to own that we are ALL alienated from God, and no effort of ours can make any difference. He says Jewish people have no special preference deal with God that they can call on, and nor can Gentile people claim ignorance as a defence. Creation itself bears witness to God. We are sick because of our alienation from God. And if left unchecked, it will just go on through generations.

Finally, at ch 3.21, there's a turning point. Three words, grace, faith and justification start to make their presence felt. The faith of Abraham which God reckoned as righteousness was until then, purely Jewish property. But now Paul claims that faith for Jew and Gentile alike as the forerunner of our justification by God's freely given grace in Jesus. That gift of grace is something we take hold of through another gift from God to us, our faith.

It's like a courtroom where our judge has become our counsel for the defence. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth talked

beautifully about this idea of God justifying us: *the one who justifies another takes their side and sees that all is well with them. God takes the lost cause of humanity and makes that cause his own in Jesus Christ.* (cf the father of the two shocking sons in the parable of the prodigal son)

Last week, in ch. 5, we heard that ⁸... *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* There were no conditions; nothing like if you behave in such-and-such a way, I'll save you. ... *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

God loves all people; God wants communion with all people. In Jesus, God experiences our alienation; in Jesus, God comes to be at one with us, and takes our alienation on himself. He takes our alienation to the Cross and to the grave. And he rises again, free from it, and invites us to share that freedom with him.

That's a lot of words and concepts, but at the heart of it is this; God loves everyone. We don't earn that love; our part is just to accept it. And as we grow into a deeper appreciation of the grace and the freedom that is the gift of God's love, our gratitude shines brighter within us and through us. We are transformed – sanctified.

Today's reading from Romans challenges us to be transformed by that gift; not to despise it or take it for granted, but to cherish it, to allow God's love to transform us, and to share it. God loves everyone. Keep sharing that. Amen.