

God is inclusive, not exclusive

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Pentecost + 10 – Transfiguration – Rom 9 1-16

People who grieve for friends in trouble sometimes wish they could take their friend's place; suffer in their place. It's rarely possible; parents can't swap places with their sick children; friends can't take the place of prisoners. But it doesn't stop us feeling it; wishing our dear ones safe and free. That's how we meet Paul this morning. He's just finished his argument that in Christ, the Gentiles are fully included in God's chosen people. But now he has to deal with the obvious question; what about God's ancient, chosen people, the Israelites. So many didn't accept Jesus as Messiah. Today in ch 9, Paul begins his argument that they're also fully included.

You may wonder why we spend time with this question. What do the politics of the earliest Christian communities have to do with us? One reason is that neo-Nazis and others still represent the New Testament in selective ways that rationalise their anti-Semitic views. And we know how extremist views can still take root and wreak astonishing harm. Christians need to be able to trace the real story – both so *we're* protected from the lies, and so we can protect *others* who might get sucked in by them. We also need to learn what the New Testament teaches about handling tensions within a Christian community, and the survival of that community within a hostile wider society. That's what Paul's on about here.

Paul is walking a diplomatic tightrope as he writes this letter. He's writing to the Christians of Rome – a diverse community that he didn't found. He knows only a small number

of people there personally. He's aware of strong tensions within the Roman Christian community. Exiled Jewish Christians are returning after five years away to find their former roles and the culture of their house churches changed. There are disagreements about the way Christians should live; if Jewish customs and traditions should also be observed by Gentile Christians. And the Jewish Christians' temporary exile from Rome was a result of tensions between them and the synagogues of Rome coming to the attention of the Emperor Claudius.

There was probably no commonly-accepted, specifically Christian authority that community members could refer to when negotiating these disputes. They had the Hebrew Bible, but the first Gospel's still about fifteen years away. So what Paul writes to them has to be based in the scriptures they do have. And it has to be true to Christ's teaching and example; it has to build up an inclusive community life and faith. Paul wants to help them negotiate the tensions within their community like he's done with all the churches he's founded elsewhere. And he has to help them function faithfully and yet live safely within a hostile, broader Roman society. It's a diplomatic mine field!

Yet it's a gospel of inclusion that Paul is writing – there's no ghetto mentality on show. So in ch. 8, he concluded his argument that Gentiles Christians are in; they're also God's called and chosen people. *Nothing can separate us from the love of God for those who are in Christ Jesus.* But what if you don't accept Jesus? Roman Christians are in contact – sometimes conflict – with Synagogues, and the question is obvious. What about people in the Synagogues? Has God withdrawn the ancient promises to them, and chosen someone else?

Last week, we saw that the way *God* chooses ^{8.29} was Paul's focus. And in today's ch. 9, he raises the issue of *our* choice; asking particularly about people

who *don't* choose Christ? The last verse we read today is our key. Paul says that ¹⁶...*it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy*. Seems simple, but we who come later are in a minefield here too. And it's not one of Paul's making. It's been laid in the centuries since; interpreters of Paul's teachings who sought to define the limits of God's grace.

Augustine of Hippo wrongly read parts of this letter (eg 8.20, 33; 9.10-13, 18) to come up with a doctrine called double predestination – that before we're even born, some of us are predestined for salvation, and some for damnation. This was later adopted by Calvin and others during the Reformation. It misrepresents Paul's argument by taking one element in it without its refutation later in the letter. ^(11.25-26) Paul's style of argument was to posit one side of the issue and pursue it for a time before offering its counter-argument and then coming to a conclusion. It's wrong to take either side out of its other side – and particularly wrong to ignore the conclusion Paul has drawn. For Paul God is inclusive, not exclusive – and in particular, Paul will conclude that God's promises to Israel will definitely be fulfilled. Antisemitism has no basis in Paul; nor does anyone's attempt to decide who is outside God's love.

There's a correlation between the passages we've heard from Romans in recent weeks and the readings we've been hearing from Genesis. Paul is reminding us of the second children we've met in those stories – Isaac born after Ishmael, and Jacob born after Esau – second children who unexpectedly receive the blessing normally reserved for a firstborn. For Paul, it's like the way we Gentiles have been chosen to receive the blessing which was originally promised to Israel. But Paul's proclaiming a radical Gospel of inclusion: the promised blessing is available to all. He will argue that the descendants of God's first people – the ancient, chosen people

of Israel – are still the bearers of God’s blessing and love too.

Which all underlines that key line in verse 16 that we remembered earlier: *...it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.* We can do nothing to earn God’s blessing; nothing to *deserve* it. It’s just there – offered with an open, loving and amazingly forbearing hand. I pray that we might take hold of that love, and be so transfigured by its goodness, and respond with such gladness and gratitude, that we bring the light of God’s healing love, kindness, joy and peace to all families of Earth. Amen