God never gives up on us. What joy!

Pentecost + 12 a – Rom 11.13-36 with Gen 45.1-15 & Matt 15.21-28

Today's reading from Romans finishes up a long section [Chs 9-11] where Paul's been at pains to assure the Roman Christians of God's faithfulness to all believers, including Jewish people who have not accepted Jesus. For us, he's raised the question, *who are the people of God?*

Who is anyone to dare to make such a judgement? But it was a real question that divided people of faith back then, and still does now. Those of us who've had visits from doorknocking evangelists, or followed the impassioned debates between churches in the global north and south will know how much of a live issue it is today. People actually dare to say who they think is in, and who is out. And these three chapters are often mentioned by both sides of the debate as the authority behind their case. The two main principles on which they base their arguments are, on the one hand, God's sovereign right to decide who's in or out, and on the other, the choice of people to have faith or not; some saying you might self exclude.

I heard Jenny Wilson (cathedral canon precentor) preach about this passage many years ago, and she made a very helpful observation. She said that just before Paul embarked on this contentious part of his letter, he wrote that wonderful paragraph at the end of chapter 8 where he concluded that *nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* [8.39] This was effectively the top of a scroll framing this part of the letter. And Paul gave the bottom frame to this section by

writing the equally wonderful doxology we just heard. *33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! 34 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 35 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' 36 For* ***from him and through him and to him are all things****. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.* ***All things***. So who *is* to exclude?

What Rev'd Jenny was saying was that by framing these three chapters with God's all-embracing love at their beginning, and God's universal embrace at their conclusion, we must assume that Paul meant to be read pastorally rather than legalistically. We're all meant to step aside from our debating and simply recognize that God is acting in every life with love and wisdom; we can all trust God.

It was certainly a pastoral matter for the early Roman Christians. *Who are God's people?* Paul was entering a live debate. He tackled this question with his analogy of the olive tree. The image of our God pruning us from the tree or grafting us back on to it says that God is at work in all of us all the time. *Who are God's people?* God's people are the tree; root, branch, and fruits. God as gardener is also an image of God as provider. God's people are the tree and those for whom the tree provides.

In the image of the olive tree, Paul acknowledges God's claim to form and nurture everyone. Formation involves unexpected pain for us when we are re-shaped by God's pruning and grafting. And the purpose, as it always *has* been with God's work with us, is not only for us to be blessed, but for us to become the means by whom God blesses all families of the Earth. Gen 12.1-3

Today's Joseph story from Genesis and the story of Jesus with

the Canaanite woman are well-timed reminders of God acting in totally unexpected ways, and the blessings those divine actions bring. Joseph could have chosen to hurt those brothers who'd sold him into slavery. But he saw the hand of God at work – love, wisdom, forgiveness – and chose a better path; a greater purpose. And he thereby rescued Israel. And Jesus admitting the faith of a Canaanite woman; even *he* seemed baffled by it. But once again, we see inclusive God reach out to all families of Earth.

So Paul today emerges from the agony of fear for his own people Israel that we saw at the beginning of Ch 9. He's scoured the scriptures for wisdom to know what forces might be at work, and he has found hope in God's kindness, God's mercy, God's grace, God's steadfast love and faithfulness. As Yale teacher Martha Highsmith writes … *Paul proclaims that* 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (v. 29)*—once given, forever ours. Nothing we do can convince God to let go of us* (cf. Rom. 8:38–39)*. … These twin constants, gift and call, are signs of God's unbounded faithfulness, which is unaffected by anything we do and, at the same time, never ceases to call us back to our own faithfulness. The gift, the grace, is irrevocable, and so is the call.*

When we encounter a loss of faith, or an obstinate refusal, these chapters remind us that God never gives up on us. What joy! **36** *For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory for ever.*

Faith in such a God is a delight for anyone to share! Amen.