

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

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Pentecost + 11 – Gen 37.1-4, 12-28, Ps 105.1-6, 16-22, Rom 10.4-15, Matt 14.22-36

I know it seems odd not to preach about Joseph's escape from slavery in Egypt, or Peter's rescue from drowning – both last-minute, unpredictable rescues, and wonderful testimonies to God's saving grace. But we're still on our way through Romans, and we're up to a part where another rescue is at stake – the rescue of a whole people caught in a seemingly unstoppable tragedy. Paul's concern is for the rescue of his own people, Israel, who have largely rejected Jesus. They can't come at a crucified Messiah. They'll keep waiting for the promised one. What will happen?

A while ago, I spoke of a moment I'd had in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It was upstairs in the twin chapel of Calvary/Golgotha, revered as the site of the crucifixion. It's upstairs to give people access to the top of a limestone outcrop where it's believed the Cross stood. The church itself was built over the site of a stone quarry. This outcrop was poor quality stone, left behind as unsuitable for use in building work. In a chapel below, through a glass panel you can see the base of this outcrop. There, people remember verses from a Psalm ^(118.22) *'the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone*, and from Isaiah ^(8.14 and 28.16) *a stone that will make people stumble*.

Paul recalled Isaiah's words back in chapter 9. ^{Rom 9.33} *See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not*

be put to shame. Like Isaiah, he was referring sadly to his fellow Israelites – their stumbling rejection of Jesus. Today, we heard Paul quote Isaiah again in a shorter form: ^{Rom 10.11} ... *scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.'* But now he's moving towards a more hopeful place.

Last week, we looked at the beginning of Paul's extended argument about God's ongoing care for the majority of Israel despite their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. He was continuing an argument about God's inclusiveness, and there was no doubt how committed Paul was to seeing his Jewish siblings access God's kindness. Paul was in anguish over the fact that most of his fellow Jews continued to seek righteousness through the law rather than through faith in Christ. ^{9.3-4} Could he do something drastic to help them, he wondered? His compassion and longing for them draw us along with him today – on the way to his conclusion later in the letter that ^{11.26} ...*all Israel will be saved.* Today, the question he tackles is this: Either Law of Moses or faith in Jesus; is there a meeting place, or is God up to something else?

Today's reading takes us straight into this question. Verse 4 raises this either/or issue of the law versus faith in Christ. ^{Rom 10.4} *Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.* In English and Greek, end / *telos* can mean termination or fulfilment. Reading 'end' as fulfilment is very like what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount – ^{Matt 5.18} *Don't think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets; I've come not to abolish but to fulfil.*

Both Paul and Jesus acknowledge the significance of the Law, but both see an essential new thing happening. What was the old thing, and what's the new one?

For the old order, Paul goes to the Hebrew Scriptures and in v. 5, quotes Moses' teaching ^{Lev 18.5} *You shall therefore keep my*

statutes and my rules; if you do them, you will live by them. Over time, Jewish teachers had come to equate 'doing the Law' with qualifying for eternal life. But you had to establish your own righteousness rather than depend on God's saving acts. Jewish Christians in Rome and elsewhere tried to impose that old order on their house-church lifestyle – food rules, Sabbath observance, circumcision and so on.

So what was the new order? Paul introduces it with more words from Moses ^{Deut 30.12-13} who says you don't have to ascend to heaven or plumb the depths to find righteousness; it's been placed on our lips and our hearts (Jeremiah prophesied the same about the new covenant. ^{Jer 30.31}) Paul tells us that with the coming of Christ, the new covenant has arrived; a gift for everyone, ^{10.9} *because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

It's important to see here that Paul is not arguing just from what *he* thinks or wishes. That's not how our faith is shaped. He draws constantly on the Hebrew Scriptures. So in v. 11, he quotes Isaiah ^{8.14} and ^{28.16}, and in v. 13, he quotes Joel ^{2.32} ... *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* No-one who believes and calls on the name of the Lord will be shamed – no matter what the religious authorities might say.

You can see where Paul's going; drawing on Moses and the prophets to gradually build his case that ^{10.12} *there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.*

What did that mean for the Christians of Rome – Jewish and Gentile Christians locked in a factional struggle about the right way to be a Christian? I think Paul saw them as a work in progress.

What does that mean for us? I think first, we need to continue to get better acquainted with Scripture and witness how God perseveres with people – no matter how pig-headed or blind we might be. And we need to open ourselves to constructive dialogue with people of faith who see things differently from us – however strange they may find us to be.

And finally for us, Paul finishes today with a call to proclamation: it's a bit different from 'mission'. We focus on compassion and social justice, but telling others of the faith is a place where we're not comfortable. Paul asks us, ¹⁴ *... how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'*

I'm struck that in this time of focus on the beautiful game, Paul calls us to develop beautiful feet. Amen