

Love is the fulfilling of the Law

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Season of Creation 2 – Pentecost + 1. Rom 12.21 – 13.10, Matt 18.10-20

I've taken a liberty with today's Romans reading. I've added the last verse from the previous chapter; ^{12.21} *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Because this verse is a pair with the closing verse of today's reading – ^{13.10} *Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.* With those verses bracketing all those words about being subject to the governing authorities, it's a reminder that this is the part of the letter where Paul's been teaching about how to manage relationships between people within the Christian community, and also between us, the Christian community and the wider society. It means the verses calling Roman Christians to be subject to governing authorities are part of this managing relationships teaching too. We need to remember that if we are to really get what Paul is trying to say.

I wrote in my weekly that one commentator said of Romans 13.1-7 that *'these verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other 7 verses in the New Testament by the license they have given to tyrants.'* ^{R Cassidy Exp Tim 121 (2010) p.383.} By that, Cassidy is referring to tyrants who have held these verses over Christian populations, using them to claim a divine right to be obeyed, no matter what they tell us to do. We are witnessing this abuse literally at work right now in the invasion of Ukraine by the church-endorsed Putin. It's not just a Russian thing; there are recent American politicians from the Obama era and since

who have also invoked these verses to coerce people to do what they say.

I'm sure Paul never dreamt that a Christian king or ruler would abuse his words in such a way as to say that God authorised their crimes. The first Christian nation, Armenia (Christian in 301 CE) was still 240 years into the future for Paul, and Rome's Emperor Constantine would only convert 11 years after that. I don't know if Paul ever envisaged such a thing as a Christian state. But anyway, tyrants claiming to be Christian have misused these verses down through the centuries. It's suited them to make it seem that Paul was saying they must be obeyed; that God wanted them to. They lied. It's easy to tell a lie, and very complicated to explain how it's wrong.

To get a clearer idea of what Paul really meant, I went to scholars who wrote back in the shadow of the world wars, where various competing armies were each told they had God on their side. I figured they'd be answering the lies of leaders who'd co-opted Paul's words. So I looked first at the Swiss scholar, Karl Barth wrote his commentary on Romans just after WW I and revised it in the troubled times of the early '30's. He made me include the verse from the end of ch. 12; *Don't be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good*. For Barth, those words put what followed in its relational context, and not to blow it out of proportion. Barth also warned that Paul doesn't call us to pass judgement on the existing order. We're no more objective judges than the people we oppose. He reads these words from 12.21 and 13.10 neither as an incitement to be a radical opponent of the state, nor its apologist. Rather, we are to recognise God's ultimate authority in these matters. Otherwise we can make things worse, as the aftermath of WW I showed so terribly. *Don't fight a monster by becoming one yourself* – was Barth's basic message.

It's a good message, but I didn't feel completely helped by this. WW II was going to drive considered Christian leaders in

Germany like Bonhoeffer to the point of attempting to assassinate Hitler. So how were these words, 13.1-7, interpreted in the aftermath of that horror? And how can we read them, knowing that so many people still hear them as an order to obey tyrants? Knowing that tyrants still misuse them?

The other commentator I went to was a German, Ernst Käsemann, who wrote his Romans commentary after WW II. He wrote this about verses 1-7. *'Paul doesn't say anything about the state as such or about the Roman Empire. The personal form of address [to individuals] is not accidental. [Paul] has in view very different local and regional authorities. And he's not so much thinking of institutions as of agencies and functions, ranging from the tax collector to the police, magistrates, and Roman officials. [These seven verses in Käsemann's view deal] with that circle of bearers of power with which a common person may come in contact and behind which they see the regional or central administration.'* ^{p.354}

So he's not talking about a prime minister or president leading their nation off to war. After all the bloodshed and misery, these words about being polite to parking officers and paying taxes; not about marching off to blindly follow our glorious leaders on their next election cycle strategy?

But it makes sense, given what we know about the fragile safety of Jews and Christians in Rome back then. Remember how we were talking about the way Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome? By the time Paul's writing this letter, those poor souls have got Nero to deal with! Paul's saying, very sensibly, lie low; don't foment revolution; keep your nose clean; blend in. And that's it.

I thank God for Cassidy, Barth and Käsemann. And with them, the Australian Jesuit, Brendan Byrne, on whom I've relied very heavily during this sermon series. Brendan Byrne reminds us the Greek word for being *subject* to authorities is very

different from the one we'd translate as *obeying* them. That's crucial too. We have agency as people under God to say yes or no – to obey or to hold on to truth. I think those four commentators we've heard from have comprehensively nailed the coffin shut on any leader's claim to a divine right to their citizens' obedience.

So these seven verses – for centuries, they've been deliberately misused to justify starting wars, to justify colonising stolen land, to justify racist oppression, and to justify exploitation of the environment. The on-going misuse of this scripture relates directly to the theme set this year for the Season of Creation; 'Let Peace and Justice Flow'. We're watching yet another war waged in the name of the divine-right delusion. And in the process, humanity's chronic war on the environment, that so often goes unremarked, has been laid bare for us all to see. It goes into hyper drive during wars. We are watching invading forces do all they can to make another people's land uninhabitable for them, or for any creatures or crops that might otherwise draw life from it.

Let peace and justice flow. How? In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us the model we need for conflict resolution; he said do it personally. And that's what we've heard Paul say too; do it personally. Jesus also gives us the reason for doing it his way. It's for the welfare of God's little ones. Chapter which began with the disciples asking Jesus who was greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus replied by calling a small child in their midst, and saying it's this one. And finally, Jesus tells us the implications are the spiritual glue that binds us all to God so that in God's power, we can set peace and justice flowing unimpeded to God's little ones.

Love is the fulfilling of the Law. Amen.