

Romans 1: 7-17 – Paul’s Passion for the Church in Rome

I don’t know about you, but Judy and I received the usual flurry of Christmas newsletters this year, very often packed full of news about people we’d almost forgotten about and their relatives who we’ve never met. But every now and again we receive a letter which hits the right note; a personal letter written with care and love which makes us realise that the person who wrote it really does care about us.

When the church in Rome received Paul’s letter I’m certain that they realised that it was written with great care and came from someone who cared for them deeply, even though they had never met. As we’ll see over this series Paul takes his time to explain to them, carefully, precisely and passionately the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. And we can see that passion coming through in this short passage today.

Firstly in the way he addresses them. Verse 7: *“to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.”* What a wonderful start to the letter – to remind his readers that they are loved by God and called to be saints. That’s what *‘holy people’* means: people who are set apart by God to reflect his character to the world. Even the blessing that comes next is packed full of meaning. These words about grace and truth come from the priestly blessing Aaron used in the Old Testament. As Dan reminded us last week, the book of Romans is all about God’s grace, the free gift of forgiveness God offers to all who come to him, and that grace brings about peace: peace between sinful human beings and a holy God, and peace between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Those whom the world would separate the gospel brings together and Paul reminds his readers about that in his opening greeting.

Secondly Paul’s passion comes through as he thanks God for them and for the way their faith is being reported across the world. Remember, just a few years before, the whole Christian church had been in Jerusalem but since the day of Pentecost the gospel had spread out through Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, even reaching Rome itself.

And this is a big deal. Rome was known as a centre of pagan religion where the decadence of Roman culture and deep Greek philosophy intertwined and where Emperor worship was just beginning to take hold. So the fact that there were Christians in Rome was staggering. As that news spread around the Christian community you could almost hear them saying, “if the gospel can reach Rome, then there is nowhere the good news of Jesus won’t have an impact.”

That’s why it is so important for us as Christians to keep an eye on the worldwide church and to be thrilled, in the same way that Paul was, that there are Christians in North Korea, in Egypt, in Iraq and Iran and Syria. Closer to home, the fact that there are Bible believing Christians who are MPs or presenters on the BBC, should give us great joy and confidence. And when we hear stories of former IRA terrorists or drug dealers becoming Christians, then like those early Christians we can say ‘if the gospel can reach there; if there can be Christians in Parliament and on TV, then there is nowhere that the gospel of Jesus can’t have an impact.’

Thirdly Paul shows his passion by praying for them. In verses 9 and 10 Paul tells them that he prays for them constantly and at all times. We’re not told what he prays for them, but if you read through many of other Paul’s letters you’ll see the content of his prayers for other churches. He will be praying that they stand firm in the gospel, and that God will open their eyes and their minds so they can see and understand more of what God has done for them at the cross, and the glorious riches and eternal inheritance that are theirs in Christ Jesus. He will pray that they will love one another deeply, and serve one another tenderly, and be proclaiming the good news boldly. Paul’s prayers are wonderful models for our own when we pray

for each other churches both in the UK and around the world. Because we should pray for other churches. I hope the regular column in the new Grapevine has helped you in your prayers to remember our five mission partners. Those of you who are on the church family list, are you using that list to pray for others here each day. I hope so. We may be separated by geography or by language or by culture from other Christians, but like Paul, we need to be praying for each other.

Fourthly he shows his passion for them by his desire to visit them. That comes out in verses 10 to 13. He has been praying that God would open the way for him to visit. He tells them in verse 11 that he longs to see them and that many times he's made plans to come to visit that haven't materialised. You see Paul doesn't just want to be pen pals with the church in Rome; he wants to have a face-to-face relationship with them. And he gives 3 reasons why.

Firstly, Paul wants to visit them so he can build them up. Verse 11: *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong."* Paul is rejoicing that their faith is growing, but having been called to be an apostle to the Gentiles he wants to do everything in his power to encourage and teach and build up the Christians in Rome. In verse 40 he talks about being a debtor to Greeks and non-Greeks, to the wise and the foolish. This is the burden, the call, that God has laid on him. Deep down in his gut Paul feels a strong obligation to see that these new Christians hold on to the gospel and grow in their faith.

That's one of the reasons why coming to church is so important because you and I also have an obligation to one another. We should never come to church simply for our own edification and enjoyment. As part of the church family here we have an obligation to each other, to encourage each other, to build each other up in our faith and we can't do that if we stay at home. Just as you and I need each other and benefit from each other's love and encouragement, so Paul knows that when he goes to Rome it won't all be one-sided. So verse 12, *"that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."*

A few years ago I spent some time in Uganda. I went out with about a dozen other people from a Christian charity to do some work in a large primary school on the outskirts of Kampala. We took lots of resources and went with lots of skills and experience and I'm sure that all those things were of real benefit to the teachers and pupils at the school. But I'm certain I gained far more than I gave, particularly from the Christians I met and talked and prayed with. Their patient faith, their confidence in God's goodness, their thankfulness, despite their poverty, for all that God had given made a lasting impression on me. And Paul knows that when he goes to Rome spending time with these young Christians will encourage his heart just as much as he encourages theirs.

Paul doesn't just have an eye on those who are already Christians – at the end of verse 13 he talks about his desire to have a harvest among the Romans, just as he has had in the other towns and cities where he has gone to preach. And for Paul this is not about empire building; it's about him fulfilling the call God has laid on his life. The God who had rescued him from sin called him to serve the church and make disciples and Paul wants to do that with every ounce of energy that he has.

So I wonder; are you that passionate about the work that God has called you to do? If right now you are called to disciple your children, or serve in the Sunday school, or lead our prayers or serve in any number of other ways: are you desperate to do it in a way that will bring most glory to God? If not, it might be because you don't have the same kind of passion for the gospel as Paul. Because it's hard to deny his passion here isn't it? If so, then maybe understanding why Paul is so passionate for these Roman Christians whom he has never met, will help us in our own lives.

So why is Paul so passionate? The answer comes in verses 16 and 17. *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘the righteous will live by faith.’”*

Firstly Paul is passionate because the gospel is good news for everyone who believes. Christianity is the one truly global faith because it is for all people everywhere, whatever background, whatever nationality. That’s why there are Christians in every single nation on the planet, even where it is illegal. That’s why throughout history the Christian church has been a missionary organisation and has taken the gospel of Jesus across the globe, because this good news is for everyone.

And it’s such a vital work because there is no other way to find salvation. Paul says here that it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. It is **the** power of God – there is no Plan B. There is no other way. There are no other routes up the same mountain. That’s why the non-believers in Rome needed to hear about Jesus. It didn’t matter how fervently they were in their pagan prayers, how committed, how sincere, or how nice, if they were worshipping a god which was not the God of the Bible, the God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ, or if they were trying to approach God in any way except through the cross of Christ then they were destined to failure and a lost eternity.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. That’s why Paul is so passionate- because everyone needs to hear it.

Secondly he so passionate because in this gospel we see God’s righteousness revealed. That happens in two ways. Firstly we see that God himself is righteous and holy. The fact that Jesus had to die to pay for the sins of the world shows us just how serious humankind’s sin and rebellion really is. People often ask me why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn’t God just have forgiven people? Well what kind of God is it that treats murder or rape or terrorism as deserving nothing more than a light telling off? And what about lies and unfaithfulness and dishonesty - surely they deserve punishment too? When we look at the cross we see the seriousness of sin, something we will see more about in the next two weeks. But the gospel of Jesus shows us that God is holy and that he is righteous and that we are not.

But secondly we see the way in which the righteousness of God can also be given to us. As Jesus dies on the cross for our sin, in our place, as our substitute the righteousness of God becomes available to all who trust in Jesus. How can we know the God who created us? How can we, sinful people, get to know God for ourselves and know that we have eternal life? We come to the cross, for at the cross God’s righteousness is revealed.

That’s the good news that Paul is passionate about proclaiming in Rome. That’s the good news we need to grasp and understand if we are to be just as passionate in our own lives.

And the great news is, and this is the third reason Paul is so passionate about it, is that this gift, this salvation is by faith, and not by works. That quote at the end comes from the book of Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4: *“The righteous will live by faith,”* and that’s true. We are made righteous by our faith in what God has done, not by what we do ourselves. So many people who would call themselves Christians go through life wondering whether they have been good enough for God, when the truth is that Jesus has been good enough for them. He was punished, he was rejected, and he was abandoned so that we need never be. We simply need to come in faith and trusting in what Jesus has already done for us. That is the gospel of Jesus. That is the good news that had got Paul so passionate the beginning of this letter.

And that's why, despite the gospel being foolishness to the Greeks and incomprehensible to the Romans and going against so much that their culture valued and taught that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. On the face of it, there are many things that might make us ashamed to tell people about Jesus. One commentator writes this *"God has intervened in history for men's salvation, not in obvious might and majesty, but in a veiled way which was bound to look to the world like abject weakness and foolishness."* Even today so many people laugh at the idea of that the only way to know God and to have eternal life is to put their faith in the fact that Jesus died on the cross for them. It all sounds so ridiculous - but that is how God chose to work. It is the truth. It is the good news of salvation. And it is the only way to God.

So as I close let me leave you with a few questions to consider: do you understand this gospel which filled Paul with such passion? Do you believe this same gospel which Paul taught with such passion? Is your life marked by that same passion? If we understood it fully and believed it wholeheartedly then just like Paul we would be passionate for the gospel of Jesus.

If you've still got questions then I hope the next few weeks as we work through the book of Romans and unpacked this glorious gospel of Jesus will answer them and fire you up with this same kind of passion. But if you've got answers that go back further, to who Jesus was and what he did, then it's still not too late to sign up for our next Identity Course. It starts on Tuesday, lasts seven weeks and it gives you a wonderful opportunity to hear and ask questions about Jesus and what he did and why it matters.

But we've also seen today how Paul showed his passion for these Roman Christians whom he had never met: how he spoke about them, how he thanked God for them and how he prayed for them and was desperate to do what he could to encourage them in their faith. May we have that same kind of commitment to each other, to our mission partners and to our brothers and sisters in Christ across this land and across the world. Amen.