

**Sunday 11 June**

**The new creation – peace with God**

Heavenly Father, may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be always pleasing to you our Lord and Redeemer, Amen

**Introduction**

This morning we begin a new preaching programme with a short series focusing on the idea of the new creation in Paul's letter to the Romans. Today's theme is 'peace with God' but before we look at that in more detail, it probably falls to me to provide a bit of context for this letter.

It is generally accepted that Romans was written in the 50s CE, probably whilst Paul was in Corinth. He had not visited Rome, but, as the centre of the Empire at the time, it was an important city and had quite a thriving (although at times fractious) Christian community. There is no question that Paul was at the height of his powers when writing Romans and many people, myself included, regard this as the epitome of Paul's theology. Like Aquinas' Summa Teologica or Augustine's City of God, Romans is a real tour de force, intellectually challenging and spiritually inspiring in equal measure. I thoroughly recommend reading through the whole letter in one sitting before spending time looking at the specific passages for the week. And if anyone would like recommendations, there are a number of really good commentaries.

It has been argued by a number of highly influential figures, not least Luther, that the central theme in Paul's writing is justification by faith, and this part of Romans, is key to that theme. But others have also suggested that Paul is

more an apocalyptic thinker who is constantly opposing the forces of evil and the forces of light. This passage we have heard this morning is often used in support of each of these different approaches to Paul's thought. But let's look at the passage in more detail.

For me, there is a really strong structure and logic to this part of Romans. Verses 1-5 are a mini-summary of the whole chapter, indeed of the whole section from Romans 5 – 8. Then there are three sections which take different elements in turn to expound the core concept in a bit more detail – so 6-11: Christ died for us all while we were sinners; 12-14: focusing on sin and in particular on Adam as 'everyperson'; 15-17: focusing on grace and justification through faith in Jesus; then a final summary in 18-20.

The central idea, I think, is bound up in a complex interplay between Paul's apocalyptic mindset and his concentration on the contrast between the Law and Life. This passage highlights Paul's sense of the battle between two opposing forces. In summary, if you will forgive the boxing metaphor, in the red corner stands Sin, Law, Death, Adam and in the blue corner is grace, faith, life, Christ Jesus. Paul is at pains to point out, to try to help the Church in Rome understand, that the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus transform the human relationship with God for all people, for all time.

In the previous chapter Paul used Abraham as the personification of faith and righteousness to contrast faith (and belief in Jesus as the Christ) with works (and belief in the law handed down by Moses). He makes it abundantly clear that for him, Paul, Abraham is a universal figure, representative of all people, and that the validation of his righteousness, being declared righteous by God, was because of his faith – Romans 4:3.

Here Paul expands on this theme in an even more powerful way. He wants to demonstrate how fundamental is the transformation that comes as a consequence of Christ's death for us on the Cross. Rather than Abraham as a universal figure (which would have been unsettling but familiar for the Jewish members of the Christian community at Rome), he contrasts Adam with Christ. So, to paraphrase 1 Corinthians 15 v22 (which is a much simpler summary than Romans), as in Adam all die, so in Christ are all made alive.

This phrase encapsulates the essence of what Paul is trying to convey in this passage. Sin and death came into the world because of Adam, because of his disobedience. Adam's actions in the Garden of Eden fundamentally wrecked the human relationship with God for all people for all time ... UNTIL (and I use capital letters for emphasis) another person transformed that human relationship with God for all people for all time through obedience, the free gift of grace and righteousness and life: Christ dying on the cross for us. For Paul, sin, death and the law (almost synonyms in this passage) are the consequence of Adam's disobedience, Adam's trespass (eg v17 'by the trespass of one man, death reigned through that one man'). Yet these forces are conquered, with equal universal force and application for all people for all time, by the consequence of the offering of Jesus on the Cross. V. 19: 'so one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.'

In Romans 3:21-24 Paul articulates this opposition very clearly: 'But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'

What Paul is trying to make clear is that just as Adam's sin brought death into the world, destroying the paradise of Eden, God's gift to us of his Son whose obedience cancels out that sin, brings life to us, to all of us, with faith. It really is a question of 'whose side are you on?' But the opportunity, the access to that grace, is available to all. And, if that were offered to us when we were sinners, v 8 'when we were still sinners, Christ died for us', how much greater, how much more is our righteousness now we have faith.

In this way Paul is striving to articulate the magnitude of the gift that we have received through God's generosity of offering his Son to die on the cross for our salvation. The dialectic between sin and grace, works and faith, death and life is continually interwoven in this passage and symbolised in the universal representativeness of Adam on the one hand and of Christ on the other. The opening sentence again: v1: 'since we have been justified through faith (ie not by works or by the law) we have peace with God, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.'

Our peaceful union of God, present at the beginning of time, in the garden was shattered by Adam's disobedience, but has been resurrected and reformed by Christ's obedience unto death on the Cross. An event which, for Paul, irrevocably, irrefutably and universally restores that peace with God.

So what does this mean for us today in Cholsey? For ourselves, for our community of faith, for our relationships? Well, Paul says first that we should rejoice. 'we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God'. I'm not saying we should necessarily be out partying (though there is no reason not to from time to time), but rejoicing is arguably meant here in a sacramental sense – the outwards and visible expression of an inward and spiritual truth. In other words, if we do truly rejoice in the hope God sets before us, then that truth will

be reflected in our outward disposition, in our attitude to others, in our relationships and all that we do. Smiling can alter one's sense of being in a nano-second, so imagine how are lives can be transformed and can transform others if we are truly rejoicing in the love of God, in his spirit and his grace. Communicating that joy to others could be incredibly powerful. Too often, Christians have a reputation for being reserved, insular, dour and drab. I'm not saying we should go as far as the Christians in Corinth clearly went before they were reined in and rebuked by Paul, but I do think we should remember that our lives were transformed by a gift and that we should be happy about that freedom.

Second, we have a responsibility as we heard from the reading from Matthew's gospel of spreading the good news (in greek euangelion, the gospel) to others. Being evangelical, the translation of eu angelion, is being the bringer of good news. And that is for all of us and we should remember that it is GOOD news and communicate it appropriately in what we say, what we do and how we live our lives.

And finally, I think we need to remember to say thank you. We have received the most amazing, the most generous, the most life-giving gift from God. We should receive it with open hands, open hearts and open minds and we should thank him – through prayer, through praise, through everything we do. As we say in offering our gifts at the end of the service: 'we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice ... all things come from you and of your own do we give you.

So today I pray that we might be joyous, even in our sufferings, that we might be good disciples bringing the good news to other, but, above all, that we be thankful for the marvellous, inexpressible joy of God's gift to us of grace, peace

and life through Jesus Christ our Lord. In the words of a Christian community  
in New Zealand:

Loving God

Open our hearts

So that we may feel the breath and play of your Spirit

Unclench our hands

So that we may reach out to one another

And touch and be healed

Open our lips

That we may drink in the delight and wonder of life

Unclog our ears

To hear your agony in our inhumanity

Open our eyes

So that we may see Christ in friend and stranger

Breathe your Spirit into us

And touch our lives with the life of Christ.

Amen