

PENTECOST 11A 16-08-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:13-32; Matthew 15: 21-28

Romans, chapter 11.13-36

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them.

For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' 'And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.' As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.

Today's readings from the Lectionary present us with an embarrassment of riches.

The first reading, from Genesis, concludes the story of Joseph- most of which the lectionary sadly leaves out. If you would like to read more about this there are copies of a good article in the foyer, so please take one.

Similarly, the story of the Canaanite woman we heard from Matthew's Gospel has a lot to teach us: but the reading was also set for a couple of Wednesday's ago, so I have a copy of that sermon available if you would like it.

Psalm 133 begins 'Behold how good and how lovely it is when families live together in unity', which of course is something we all remember whilst yelling at the children, shouting at our teenagers, having a row with our significant other, or wondering how our siblings came from the same family when they are being difficult.

The NRSV, however, translates 'families' as 'kindred', which is not quite the same, and this psalm may be more about national unity than family unity: a prayer that the divided kingdoms of North and South will be reunited with Zion-Jerusalem- as the capital, ruled by one anointed king, as it was in the time of Saul, David, and Solomon.

So we come to Paul's letter to the church in Rome. We have heard parts of this letter for the past nine Sundays- this is the 10th. Like me you may have found some of Paul's writing extremely difficult to understand; he sometimes uses exceedingly long sentences, complicated arguments, and an ancient form of logic that is foreign to our ears.

In the section set for today Paul is speaking to a largely non-Jewish readership, seeking to help them and himself understand why many of his fellow Jews seem to have rejected the gospel. In last week's reading Paul says that his heart's desire is that they may be saved.

Earlier in chapter 11 he asks the rhetorical question: has God rejected God's people? If some of the Jews, God's chosen people, have not accepted Jesus as the one sent from God, the Messiah, does that mean they no longer belong to God?

Are they lost forever? What about the covenant and God's promises? Didn't God say they were beloved and always would be?

Paul goes on to say that some who belong to Israel have stumbled, and because they stumbled salvation was extended to the Gentiles. He hopes that his own people will see this and be envious of what Christians have, and so they will come to faith in Jesus.

It seems that some of the Christians in Rome had begun to think they were superior to Jews, but Paul puts them right. If the people of Israel are like an ancient, fruitful olive tree with deep roots, non-Jewish Christians are like branches of wild trees that have been skilfully grafted on to the tree- replacing original branches that have broken off.

There is a warning for them, and us, not to think ourselves better than them because it is only through God's grace that we have been joined to the tree- not through anything we have done.

Paul is convinced that his Jewish sisters and brothers are still beloved of God, because God's promises are irrevocable, and they too will be brought into the kingdom.

Parts of the Christian church have at times thought this meant they must evangelize Jewish people and persuade them to convert to Christianity, but that is not what Paul is saying.

Paul wanted his readers and hearers to know that God's love is deeper, richer, and wiser than we can know; God's ways are not our ways, and we cannot know God's mind.

Paul knows that God's promises are not broken, ever. Even as his heart breaks for his fellow Jews, as he longs for them to know the love of Christ, he believes that God will never forget or reject them.

What does this mean for us? First, it serves to remind us that everything Jesus did and taught builds on the story and faith of Israel. If we want to understand what Jesus did and said we need to read and understand his scriptures- what we now refer to as the Old Testament. The New Testament does not replace the Old, make it irrelevant or supersede it. That is heresy. We need it all.

Second, it reminds us that God's promises are eternal and unbreakable. When God said to Abraham that all the nations of the Earth would be blessed through him, God meant it.

Third, it reminds us that God's love and mercy extend to all- even those who reject Jesus, God's Son. Even them. None of us deserves God's love, because all of us are sinners; all of us have fallen short of what God expects of us and what God dreams for us.

This does not mean we are worthless, deserving punishment and condemnation. It means that God's love for us is greater than we can imagine because in God's eyes, we are loveable.

How many of us genuinely believe that we are loveable? That we are of infinite value to God, who knows every hair on our heads?

When a child or an adult feels worthless, unloved, and unlovable, every aspect of their lives is affected: body, mind, and spirit all suffer greatly. Children taken from their parents to live in orphanages where nobody treats them with loving care can struggle throughout life, as we have seen in Stolen Generation people and those who were shipped out from Britain as so-called Child Migrants.

People who grew up with loving families can sometimes conclude they are unlovable or unworthy for all kinds of reasons. It took me a long time to really believe that God loves me unconditionally.

I like the idea that says, 'If God had a fridge, your picture would be on it'! This is the Good News, the best news, the news that had Paul bursting into praise: the realisation that God loves us. All of us. This is the news we must share because the world desperately needs to hear it. God loves us, however we feel or whatever we think, so make sure you tell everyone.

The Lord be with you.