

Sermon: Romans 12 & Beatitudes 24 September 2017 St Martin's

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN

Today is the last of our special Sunday readings before we return to the Lectionary which follows the seasons and festivals of the Church's year. For the past 4 months, Gary has chosen readings from the Book of Acts and the Epistles to help us to grow as Christians and to grow as a church. The Homegroups have been given sessions to tie in with this and there have also been 3 evening teaching sessions: on the Book of Acts; on Paul's early epistles; and on the Pastoral Epistles. And finally, PCC members from the 3 churches were invited by the Benefice Council to consider ordained and lay ministry in the Benefice. So Gary and Dorothy, the lay ministry team, homegroup leaders and others have worked hard on this theme of 'Growing' for quite a long time.

Through our readings and sermons we have been inspired by the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem, the small Jewish capital city, to Rome, the very centre of the known world in the 1st century AD. We have seen Christian leaders working through problems and leaving behind some of their old ways to embrace the new. Just as we have had to adapt to a new way of worship here at St Martin's.

So I think we should take a few moments now to think how this focus on 'Growing' in the last 4 months has affected each of us. Because it's about our personal growth as a Christian; and only then will it have an impact on the growth of our church here at St Martin's. How has it affected our faith, our Bible knowledge, our prayer-life, our involvement in worship and the whole life of the church? Has it made us more effective Christians in our everyday lives?

ROMANS 12

Let's turn now to our Epistle reading from Romans chapter 12, which is printed on your pew sheet. Most of Paul's epistles were letters written to churches that he had established, answering specific queries and dealing with issues that had arisen in his absence. But Paul didn't go to Rome until the very end of his life, so this epistle is written in general terms, spelling out the basic elements of Christian teaching and for this reason, the letter is of particular use to Christians today. Paul has spent 11 chapters on quite difficult theology, explaining how God has given us new life in Christ; he now shows us how we are to live that new life for Christ, how to put our faith into action.

The first main section in chapter 12 (vv 4-8) covers the various roles played by Christians in the life of the church and verses 9 to the end talk about the importance of love in many different aspects of Christian life. There is so much in this chapter that I can't do it justice in a 10 minute sermon, but let me focus on a few ideas which tie it in with the whole direction that the 'Growing' course has taken us in, and also links in with our Communion service.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Gary has given our reading the theme 'The Gospel is everyone's work' – which has been an important theme in much of our study over the last 4 months. For instance, that 'The Gospel is for all' (Acts 10), that we are united together in Christ (Philippians 2) and we have read about the spiritual gifts necessary to 'Build the Church' in Ephesians 4. In both Ephesians and here again in Romans, Paul uses the analogy of the body with its many different parts. The 'body of

Christ' was Paul's favourite term for the church, and he speaks of us all having a part to play, united together with Christ as the head. Our Communion service also uses this imagery: The priest says: 'We break this bread to share in the body of Christ', and we say, 'Though we are many we are one body, because we all share in one bread.' (ibid. p 179)

If you look at verses 3 to 8, Paul emphasises the need for humility as we take on different roles within the church as one body in Christ. The body has many parts, but we need them all. In the same way we are all dependent on each other in our worship and church life. It goes on to say that God has given us different gifts needed to do the tasks allotted to us. God has made us all different and we should rejoice with him in our differences and be thankful for our different gifts. We should each pray for discernment in finding and fulfilling the role that God has for us to do.

LIVING SACRIFICES

Looking now at new ideas in Romans 12 - The chapter is introduced in verse 1 with the idea that we should be living sacrifices. When Paul wrote this, the Temple in Jerusalem still stood, where the priests daily offered animal sacrifices to God. Paul encourages a different kind of worship. He says, 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' (v1) One of our prayers after Communion takes up this idea:

'Almighty God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of your Son JC. Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise & glory. (Common Worship p 182)

So our spiritual worship isn't just something that takes place in church services, but it's what we do as we go out from church into the world. Christ has offered his body and blood in sacrifice on the cross. Our sacrifice is to live each day as a Christian – offering our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice to God, to live and work to his praise and glory.

Paul talks about this type of sacrificial living as 'holy and acceptable to God.' ... I've been reading a book recently on some of the different spiritual traditions in the church – like the Evangelical Tradition and the Contemplative Tradition.

One chapter is on the Holiness Tradition, also known as the Righteousness Tradition; and Romans 12 is a very good example of this. There's a danger of thinking of holiness and righteousness as being particularly religious – 'holier than thou' – perhaps something for the clergy but not for us lesser mortals.

But put simply, the holiness tradition is faith in action. As St James tell us 'Faith without works is dead'. The two go together: faith and works. It's a spiritual tradition because it grows out of faith and is inspired by God, who is righteous and the source of all goodness. It focuses on the inward reformation of our hearts and minds to help us lead lives worthy of our calling as Christians.

(Notice how) in verse 2 Paul says:

'Be transformed by the renewing of your minds; so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.'

If we are to be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, then we should be open to new ways of thinking and allow God to send us out into the world to live and work to his praise and glory.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER cf. JESUS

And the last section of Romans 12 has links with Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, where love is at the root of everything. We don't know if Paul ever heard Jesus teach, certainly he wasn't a disciple in Jesus' lifetime, and much of his theology focuses on salvation through the resurrection of Christ and justification by faith. I find it refreshing, therefore, to find here teaching on humility, on generosity, on loving one another, even our enemies - all of which Jesus taught about and lived out in his life. And much of which is summed up in that poetic passage from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes, which was our Gospel reading, and which is also about trying to live a righteous and holy life.

I would encourage you to re-read Romans 12 slowly to yourselves. There is so much valuable teaching here about our roles within the church and also how to live out our Christian faith in our everyday lives. As you read it, try to find a verse that stands out for you. For me, it's verse 12, which is my closing prayer:

Heavenly Father,

May we 'rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, (and) persevere in prayer.'

Amen