

## Romans 5: 1-8 & Matthew 9: 35 10: 8

Sunday 18 June 2023

*'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.'* It's a lament in churches countrywide: where are the volunteers? In particular, who will go for us and share the message, and reverse the tide of decline? We can follow Jesus' instruction to pray to the Lord to send people out, but we may find it harder to be part of the answer to that prayer. For many of us (myself included) all too often it's a case of, 'Here I am Lord. Send someone else!'

Why do we find it so hard? I'm sure there are lots of reasons, but a basic one is that we're not confident we know what to say. A simple answer to that is, 'It's all in the Bible,' but then there's an awful lot in the Bible! Many of the greatest evangelists and preachers have taken the message of St Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. But, for many today, Paul is the problem. Paul represents what we find difficult: he uses long words – justification, reconciliation, predestination – and complicated sentences that never come to an end. Worse still, he seems to be answering questions no one today is asking. Turning to Paul for the message can feel like being confronted with a great big brick wall – an insurmountable barrier. However, I want to put a different case, that if we read Paul in a slightly different way, we can find him dealing with questions as true to our times as his, ones that can give us confidence again when stepping into the harvest field, that we really have good news for all.

We'll be having readings from Romans for at least the next two months, so you can decide for yourselves if I'm right. For today, I want to take two examples from this morning's reading in Romans 5. First, suffering. Nobody could claim that suffering is not a contemporary issue. Romans 5: 3-4 says: *'We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope.'* Now be clear: Paul is not giving a general answer to the big questions, 'Why do the innocent suffer?' And he certainly is not saying that God causes suffering in order that you may learn perseverance, character and hope; or that you can smile and all your problems will go away! Begin by accepting that suffering happens to everyone (including to Jesus' followers) how do you respond to it and turn it to the good?

The first sort of Christian ministry I undertook was in my late teens, helping run a Christian youth camp in the Lake District. I remember well the camp leader using these verses for his morning talk to inspire his leadership team. Of course, we all knew this wasn't real suffering, but it feels a bit like it when you're looking after a bunch of semi-recalcitrant 12- to 15-year-olds, whilst the rain hammers on the tent and wet canvas flaps in your face all night... and you call this a holiday! I think most would agree it was a character-building experience, and most of us kept going back for more!

At a much more significant level, we see it in others. Through the suffering of illness and bereavement, we are so often humbled to witness character change – sometimes greater resilience, sometimes more compassion and empathy.

Of course, negative change is also possible – bitterness and resentment – so it takes right choices, and it takes the grace of God, to make that journey through perseverance, character and hope. (I do sympathise with the person who said I can take all the pain in the world; it's need to be gracious about it that drives me mad!)

St Paul goes further than character-building. Through suffering we are driven beyond our own resources and have to turn to God because there is nowhere else to turn. And then – not to our timetable and not in ways we'd expect – God proves himself faithful. And therefore we have hope that will not disappoint. This is not the human hope of having a nice day, but the true hope of life with God, always, everywhere, for ever. We have to be careful in our words not to tread on toes, but surely that is good news worth telling people about.

Second example: justification – that most Pauline of words. Romans 5: 1 – *'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'* You say, 'Surely nobody today is asking about justification? To talk about it is just like hitting that brick wall.' I do think we have to change our language, but actually it is pointing to some really important and relevant issues. It's often said we live in a society that tolerates everything and forgives nothing. If there's no forgiveness, then we are caught up with a continual round of self-justification, usually (following the politicians) using evasions, slights of hand, economies with the truth, and down-right lies.

The Gospel gives us a different starting point: *'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'* Made in the image of God, God's glory is still within us, but, as we admit in our confession week by week, 'we have wounded God's love and marred that image within us.' That's when God takes the initiative. Romans 5: 8 – *'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'* He didn't ask us to justify ourselves. He didn't wait for us to sort ourselves out first. God acted in Jesus, and that is all the justification we need.

The reality remains we are all far from perfect. We recognise the need to be held to account for our actions. That's true whether it's at the level of Ofsted Inspections or Parliamentary Enquiries or just a quiet word from a friend. Most people find criticism – even the most constructive criticism (whether justified or unjustified) hard to take. Lives can be filled with fear and all sorts of harm can be done. But if we know, deep down, that we are loved by God – loved so much he sent his Son to die for us, although we are still sinners – then we have no reason to fear. If Christ has justified us, who then can condemn. If we've accepted that fact, then we're in a much better place to receive 'suggestions for improvement'. If our prime relationship is with God through Jesus, then we truly have nothing to fear – and that's a message of good news people can understand if we are prepared to share it.

Pray then, that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into the harvest fields. There is so much good news to take. Dare to pray that one of those workers will be you.