

Sermon notes - 13 Sept 2020 – Living with a God perspective.

Paul in his letter to the Romans is encouraging and teaching the Gentile converts about how to live as a follower of Jesus Christ, particularly from chapters 12-15. His is a very practical teaching which is based on the earlier solid foundation in the first portion of the letter. On the surface, this small section in particular, can seem to be somewhat removed from our life in 2020. Eating or not eating meat. Observing special days or not. These seem not to be the concerns of our life. But it doesn't take much digging and we can start to see the parallels to our own faith journey. And when we broaden the context, seeing what Paul is speaking about throughout the whole latter section of the letter, then it becomes vitally relevant to the here and now, to life here in Sydney in 2020, and in the middle of a pandemic. He is seeking to give a different perspective about life - a God perspective, and this is important no matter who we are and no matter where and when we live. It's particularly important when we are surrounded by so many restrictions and limitations - what is the God perspective for times like these?

A couple of contextual remarks from the chapters around these verses -

- Chapter 12 - In light of God's mercy....live so as to please God. Grace and mercy is the beginning of all living.
- We are all part of Christ's body - each has unique gifts and must give, and yet we are all members of the one body.
- Bless your enemy! Overcome evil with good.
- Chapter 13 - Respect authority - particularly the government and our leaders. We are not prohibited from speaking out against injustice, where there are people suffering and being ignored, we must speak for those who have no voice. But we are also required to respect and follow the laws of our land. Paul places this all within the context of Love. No matter who we are dealing with, whether friend or foe. Believer or not. Person in need, person in authority...love is the one distinguishing and overriding commandment. In this way we will most clearly speak of Christ Jesus. In this we will most nearly serve God.

At this point, we move to a part of the letter which is specifically referring to the way we relate to other believers, and yet in so many ways, there is no difference. Love is still the way that we need to proceed. Seeking always to love God and love others - as indeed we love ourselves. In Chapter 13, Paul speaks about this extensively, and in verse 10 he says "Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God's requirements." Truly this summarises the details of how we are to live. How we walk out our faith in Christ Jesus. Easy in theory but not so easy in practice.

In order that we might know how this works in the specifics of our situation, Paul goes through one of the issues facing the Gentile believers, especially given that they are surrounded by Greek forms of worship and devotion, and that they are trying to come to terms with a faith that has emerged from a Jewish context...and yet was transformed by the person and work of Jesus.

Paul gives some basic principles which are very helpful for us:

- Accept everyone and do not condemn. We are not to stand in judgement of another - only God is judge. Each person must stand before Him and be reconciled. Rather Paul says in verse 13 "Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in other Christian's path." This is not prescriptive. This is dependent on context. (COVID example).
- Each person exists and belongs to God. All of me. All of you. In our life. In our death. We are God's. This is true and proven in Christ Jesus. He lived. He died. He rose to life again. He is the Lord of all of us. No exception. With him lies ultimate authority. And in him and through him lies ultimate love. We need to leave judgement in his hands. We seek, as far as we are able, to love others. With the same love that is shown to us, living out of that deep and transformative truth...I AM LOVED. YOU ARE LOVED. When the hard times come, when the world as we know it seems to tremble and fade...we stand on the solid ground that is God's everlasting love for each one of us...and that's the point where we can turn to our first and second reading. (Spiritual disciplines example).

Genesis 50 shows that Joseph knew that he was loved. He did not need to seek justice or retribution against his brothers. He didn't need to gain their approval. He truly knew who was truly in charge in his own life, and over all life. His life had been a roller coaster of trials and tribulations, and at this stage in the story, he looked like he had it made. A ruler second only to Pharaoh, and a very powerful man not only in the Egyptian nation, but in the whole known world. Yet power did not consume him and he had come to a deep and lasting understanding of who he truly was, and who God was. Joseph had a God perspective...but he had come to know this because of the extreme hardships he had gone through. In the midst of our own difficult times, are we able to more clearly see that God is at work for us, with us, through us. There is more to hardship than meets the eye. When we see with the eyes of faith...see from the God perspective, then we can journey through the valleys knowing that we are not alone, never alone.

Jesus speaks of this God perspective in Matthew 16 – He is starting to prepare his disciples for his suffering, death and then resurrection. Peter doesn't get it, Jesus suffer and die?? Surely that's bad right! ... but he's looking at things from a human perspective, and Jesus has to put him straight in no uncertain terms! "You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (v.23) Almost the exact words used by Paul in Romans 14:13. We must be aware that we are not causing our fellow brothers and sisters to stumble. Love is what motivates all our actions, all our words, our whole life!

David was another biblical figure that went through some deep and dark times, and yet his songs and poems which we know in the psalms are always giving us the God perspective. How valuable it is to speak words which are true, despite how we may feel, despite how things might look, despite what other people are saying around us.

103:10 -13

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

Spending time regularly with God, reading and reflecting and soaking up God's perspective is vital for allowing us to live out of this perspective – so different to the perspective of the world around us. Constantly reminding ourselves of the strong and sure foundation of God's steadfast love. Be receivers of God's precious gift in order that we might be able to give it out to those around us.

We can be light in a world that is often dark and despairing.