

π *"a Righteousness from God"*

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 7 March 2010 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Romans 1:1-17
<u>Reading</u>	Romans 1:1-17
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

What do you think the Apostle means when he talks about the righteousness of God.
What does it mean to you?

How do feel about the notion of being confronted by a supreme being
who commands,
indeed demands your allegiance?

I have been struck this week by the sheer pragmatism
and amorality
of the culture being pedalled by the media in our society today.

In the Times magazine,
I came across an article
where four women gave accounts of their extramarital affairs
and told how these experiences had actually stimulated and improved their marriages.
Any idea of trust or fidelity
appeared to have been sacrificed
on the altar of indulgence.

The second was an article in another magazine
extolling the benefits of an open relationship,
where, by agreement, each partner is free to have additional sexual partners.
The difficulties this imposed on the marriage relationship
were discussed in pragmatic rather than moral terms.

And in the same publication,
the pros and cons of flirting by text on your mobile phone were discussed,
and the kind of language you need to use to avoid the problems of being found out.

This is the nature of our environment,
where boundaries are blurred,
where there is no honour,

little trust,
conspicuous deception,
and where right and wrong are disposable commodities of negligible worth.

In such a culture, the Book of Romans in the Bible is anathema.

Critics would argue that it has no relevance in modern Britain,
its ideas and arguments belonging to a bygone age -
anachronistic and of no consequence whatsoever in the 21st century.
And they would be right,
unless God is real.

The Book of Romans cuts like a scythe across the cultural norms of our day
and transports us into a world
where our relationship with a holy and righteous God comes under intense scrutiny.

Today, we start at the beginning.
Who wrote this letter, when and why?

The letter was written by the apostle Paul.
He describes himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ,
called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God.” (Romans 1:1)

Many of us are familiar with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road,
where he was struck down by a blinding light from heaven.
and the Lord demanded to know why Saul was persecuting him.
Saul was on his way to Damascus
with authority to arrest any Christians he found there,
but God intervened.

In the ensuing days God sent his servant Ananias to visit Saul
and this is what the Lord about Saul:
*“This man is a chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and
their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he
must suffer for my name.”* (Acts 9:15-16)

Born around AD 5,
Saul was of Roman citizenship,
but educated as a Pharisee,
and before his conversion was antagonist to the cause of Christ,
until the Lord appeared to him on his way to Damascus.

Within a few days,
he was preaching the Gospel,
baffling the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:20-22)
Yet it would be another ten or eleven years,
before he received his second call
which would launch him on his missionary travels.

It happened at a prayer meeting in Antioch, around the year 46 AD,
when the Holy Spirit called Saul, along with Barnabus
to be set apart for the work to which he had been called.

Saul became known as Paul and he never forget his special calling
to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

To him, it was his life's work
and he continued to fulfil that calling for the rest of his days,
until he was finally martyred in Rome in his early sixties.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was his passion
and wherever he went he would find an opportunity to preach it.

At first, he would preach in the Jewish synagogues,
but this often led to hostility from the Jews
so he would take the few Jews who had been converted
and would move out to other premises
where he could welcome Gentiles too.

He longed for his fellow Jews to accept the Gospel
but his primary mission was to non-Jews.

In his greeting here he expands on the gospel,
saying that it was promised beforehand by the prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

He tells us that by human nature, Jesus was a descendant of David,
but was declared by the Holy Spirit to be the Son of God,
this being demonstrated by his resurrection from the dead. (1:3-4)

It was through Him that Paul received grace and apostleship,
which gave him both the ability and the authority
to call people from among the Gentiles to obedience.

And here we already get a hint of what is to come in this letter.

It is the obedience that comes from faith.

Paul will argue later that it was Abraham's faith,
rather than his works,
which was credited to him as righteousness, (4:1-3)

And that this was not 'for him alone'
'but also for us'. (4:23-24)

"And you also", he says to his readers
"are among those called to belong to Jesus Christ." (1:6)

So we see here already the inclusiveness of Paul's Gospel.

The message is for all.

All are included.

There is no difference between male and female as far as the Gospel is concerned.

Slave or free,

Jew or Gentile.

Whoever you are you are included in God's plan of salvation.

In this respect all are equal.

All are equally sinful.

And as we shall see all are called to believe and receive this righteousness
that comes as a gift from God.

The letter is addressed to the Christian church in Rome.

Paul's lifelong ambition was to visit Rome and preach the Gospel there,
but he had never been.

We often attribute the entire spread of Christianity across the Roman world to Paul,
but that is not entirely the case.

Though Paul had not been inactive since his conversion in AD 36,
by the time he went to Antioch some seven years later,
there was already an established church there.

Luke tells us in Acts 11 that after the martyrdom of Stephen
the Christians were persecuted and travelled widely
preaching the Gospel not only to Jews,
but to Greeks as well. (Acts 11:19-21)

Antioch is cited as an example of where both Jews and Gentiles had come to Christ
The church there had caught the attention of the Jerusalem Church
and they had sent Barnabus to minister there. (Acts 11:22-26)

And it was this church that commissioned Paul for his evangelistic ministry to the gentiles.

From that time on,
Paul's ministry took him ever further westwards,
and on both his second and third tours he got as far as Corinth.
But he never made it to Rome.

The church at Rome developed without ever having heard Paul's gospel,
though he may indirectly have contributed to it
through the many connections he made on his travels.

It is thought that he wrote this letter to the church in Rome
during his second visit to Corinth in the winter of 56-57 AD.

By then clearly the church there had an established reputation
and Paul is able to thank God for their faith
which, he says, 'is reported all over the world'. (Romans 1:8)

Paul addresses his letter
"to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints."
This simple greeting enshrines so much of Paul's view of the people of God. (1:7)

Firstly, God loves them.
Later, Paul will show that 'God demonstrates his love for us
in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5:8)

Jesus himself tells us that
'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son
that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.' (John 3:16)

Jesus came to demonstrate that love.

Secondly they are saints.

Not special people who are elevated to honour by the church,
but ordinary people set apart to follow Christ
and *made* holy by his grace alone.

The New Testament has no place for Saints, sainted for their performance.
In Christ's kingdom all believers are saints
- made special by Him.

Paul had many friends in the Roman church.
The extensive and detailed greetings in chapter 16 include men and women:
- people he had worked with.
- those he had led to Christ.
- those who were leaders in the church
and those who were servants of the church.

He constantly remembers them in his prayers
and he longs for the opportunity to visit them.
He has planned to do so many times,
but so far it has not been possible.

His reason to visit them is, as always, the Gospel.
Though he hopes also to receive from them,
so that there should be mutual spiritual benefit.
Paul had learnt that the benefits of Christian ministry were never only one way.
Each of us ministers in our own way to the other.
That is the secret of the body of Christ.

But Paul is bound both to Greeks and barbarians to preach the Gospel -
both to the wise and the foolish.

This is the beauty of the Gospel.
It can be understood by the simplest of souls,
yet its mysteries are deep enough to exercise, satisfy and be intelligible
to the most complex intellect.
God never short changes anyone,
and neither should we.

Paul is bound to preach.
He feels the burden of the Gospel
and he must deliver it.
He often says in his writings that he has been given this gift
and he is obligated to pass it on,
so he goes, often in fear and trembling,
but with tenacity and determination
to proclaim the message with which he has been entrusted
and he is willing to do so at great personal cost.

This is what drives him to visit Rome so that he might deliver his message there too.

Furthermore, he is not ashamed of it.
When I was a teenager, I was so ashamed of being a Christian,
that I never told anyone if I could help it.
My father would encourage us boys to 'nail our colours to the mast' as he put it,
but it made no difference.
I was so ashamed of my beliefs and my association with the exclusive brethren

that I was withdrawn and had little self-confidence.
As I matured,
and found a more reasonable Christianity
and as I came to realise that it was not so difficult after all
to talk about what you believe,
it became easier.
And now I can hold my own in most situations
and I can honestly say I am no longer ashamed of my Christianity.
But it has always been a struggle.

Paul, however lived at a time that was extremely hostile to the Gospel.
And if you read the book of Acts you will see how often he was attacked,
threatened,
brutalised,
imprisoned
or driven out of a town for his preaching
Yet he says he is not ashamed of the Gospel.
In fact he is eager to preach it.

Why?
“Because it is the power of God for salvation”. (1:16)

The power of course is not in the words,
but in the content of this Gospel.

In its simplest form,
God sent his Son into the world to save sinful man.
Man had disobeyed God
and if we were to be reconciled to Him,
someone who is perfect must die in our place.
That someone was Jesus Christ, who died at Calvary
and on the third day rose from the dead
and now sits in heaven at God’s right hand.
God can now be merciful to us,
because Jesus has been punished for our sins.
So by God’s power everyone who believes is saved from eternal death.
This offer is available to all.

This is such wonderful news that it must be passed on.
How can one be ashamed of such a powerful message?
Only if we are more fearful of our fellow men than we are of a Holy God
will we be ashamed of his message.

Yet because our neighbours are a lot closer than a God in heaven,
in practice we often are ashamed.
Paul’s example may give us the strength to overcome that shame
through the Holy Spirit’s power.

And the secret of this Gospel,
which Paul so longs to proclaim reveals ‘a righteousness from God’.

This phrase 'a Righteousness from God' could be the title of this book.
For from this point onwards Paul sets out his stall.

Beginning with the wickedness of man from verse 18 onwards,
Paul develops an argument to demonstrate
that God is not only righteous in Himself,
but he acts righteously in sentencing his Son to death
and being merciful to mankind,
and on top of that endows those who believe with a righteousness
which is not their own
which they have not earned
and do not deserve.

The text which Paul uses for his treatise is a verse from the prophet Habakkuk,
"but the righteous shall live by faith". (Habakkuk 2:4)

The magic of the Gospel is that through faith in Christ alone,
we can receive a righteousness from God
and stand in his presence for evermore
claiming only the death of Christ as our defence.
And as an added blessing he takes us into his family
and makes us his own.
That is the wonder of the salvation proclaimed in the Gospel.

Paul felt unable to visit the church in Rome,
so he wrote this amazing letter to them,
so that if he never got there,
they would have heard his Gospel.
Little did he know that when he did see them it would be as a Roman prisoner
and not as a free man,
but by then this wonderful exposition of God's righteousness
had been read,
copied,
and distributed
and become a favoured text in the early church
and as a result we have the incomparable privilege of reading it today in our Bibles.

As Andrew laid out last week,
this book of Romans has been an inspiration to many.

It inspired Luther
and fuelled the Reformation,
It inspired John Wesley
and his mission in which thousands came to Christ
and our prayer today is that it will inspire us
to greater service to Christ
and the spreading of this Gospel,
in the darkness of the post-modern age in which we live.

May you and I be uplifted and encouraged

as we study this Epistle of Romans in the coming weeks
and may we rejoice to receive this Righteousness
that comes from God alone.

Amen

Paul Rydon – 7 March 2010