

The Year of St Paul 2008–2009



The letter to the Romans in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is read over Sundays 9 – 24 in Year A
(It's also heard in Advent, Lent and at the Easter Vigil)

Paul's letter to the Romans

The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness.

For when we cannot choose the words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God.

Romans 8 26–27

The letter to the Romans is remarkable in a number of ways. In the first place, it's Paul's longest (which is the only reason why its printed first of the Pauline Letters in your New Testament). Secondly, there's a case to be made for regarding it as the most influential document in the whole Bible. Thirdly, it is very unusual in that it was written to a congregation that Paul didn't know, but *hoped* to visit. And, fourthly, Paul is (unusually for him) doing his level best to be diplomatic (!); you can almost hear him treading on the egg-shells.

Why did he write it, then?

Well, he himself gives three reasons:

- ⊗ *he wants to come and see the Christians in Rome (1:11-15 – and see how careful he is in these verses not to imply that they might not have the full gospel)*
- ⊗ *he wants them to finance a missionary journey to Spain (15:24, 28)*
- ⊗ *he wants their prayers, and perhaps an intervention on their part, to protect him from people in Jerusalem (15:31). These seem to have been of two kinds: Jews who were not Christians, who were offended by his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, and, secondly, Jewish Christians who were offended by what seemed to them his cavalier attitude towards the Jewish Law.*

Paul was a prickly character, not always guarded in what he said; and in the Letter to the Galatians, which is by some way the angriest of his epistles, he said some really quite regrettable things. This seems to have offended some Jerusalem Christians, to a point where Paul feared that they wouldn't accept the collection that he had made for them among the wealthier churches of Greece and Asia Minor; **and for Paul the collection was a very important sign of the unity of Christians.**

So in the Letter to the Romans Paul rehearses the argument of Galatians, but without the intemperate language.

Boil it down to its essentials, and the Letter to the Romans is a love-story, rehearsing the “power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”. It's the story of God's love for humanity in Jesus Christ.

So we don't have to deserve the love of God; we can't possibly deserve it, merely respond in “faith” or “trust” or “commitment” (the word can be translated in a number of different ways). To make his argument, Paul starts by making the point that our world (whoever we are) is in a mess, and requires God's intervention; and then he makes them think (in chapter 4) about the person of Abraham as a prime example of the recipient of God's unconditional love; he was not loved because he was circumcised, for he had received God's loving promise before he was circumcised. The argument hereabouts is rather difficult, and will make your head spin; but try seeing it as a love-story and it gets easier.

Then in chapters 5-8 Paul continues his account of God's love by giving us who aren't Jews grounds for confidence. This leaves unresolved the question of what happens to Paul's fellow-Jews; has God changed his mind about them? So, in chapters 9-11 Paul offers some very dense argument to show that they too are part of God's loving plan.

The rest of the chapters in various ways apply this love-story to the situation in Rome (a situation of some tension between Christians of Jewish origin and those of non-Jewish origin), explaining how they're to treat each other (with love), what they're to do about paying taxes to the Roman authorities (pay them!), what to do when different sections of the Church hold differing views about dietary laws (look out for the interests and concerns of the other). Then, towards the end of chapter 15, Paul speaks of his plans; and then comes chapter 16. Have a good look at this, if for no better reason than that it is never read out in church, and see how careful he is to emphasise that there are people in Rome who can vouch for him, and likewise people in Corinth (where he is dictating the letter) who are known to the Roman Christians, and who can speak on his behalf.

But all the time remember: we're talking here of a love-story, ***which is Paul's love for Jesus*** (whose “slave” Paul proudly pronounces himself in the very first line of the letter), ***Jesus' love for his body, the Church, and God's love for a largely hostile world.***

That's the clue to reading this extraordinary epistle, and understanding it well.

Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we're troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked. These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us.

For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.