**Romans sermon series session 2**

**11th February** **2024** 10.30am Village Morning Worship St Mary Magdalene, Waltham on the Wolds

Last week, as a Benefice, we started a ten part sermon series based on Dr Andrew Ollerton’s book *Romans: A Letter that Makes Sense of Life*. Each session takes us along a journey that will help us discover more about our place in God’s story.

Our journey through Romans is pictured as being like climbing a mountain – see the leaflet & slide - a mountain showing where each chapter of Romans fits in. To quote Andrew Ollerton: “It’s been said that if the New Testament were the Himalayas, Romans would be Mount Everest and chapter 8 would be the summit. Together we will take on the challenge of ascending to the summit, enjoying the view and then descending out into life, practicing what we’ve learned.”

Today we’re in session 2, in the valley. Andrew describes is as the valley of sin – and that’s what we are exploring this morning.

Sin is a contentious word and issue – tho’ I think most of us if asked would be able to give a definition of what we think it means! They might vary a lot, but it’s something we are familiar with.

Let’s consider these questions:

What is wrong with the world today?

What is wrong with that person that they behave like…..

How many of you have ever asked those questions, or heard them? I hear them a lot, indeed we say it ourselves don’t we – what on earth is wrong with….how can they do such and such….

But before we get into the truth about sin, let’s re-cap the truth about God.

(slide)

Paul says this: For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. For many of us when we look at nature, either around us, or through the lens of science, are caused to wonder at creation – its intricacy, its beauty, its diversity. As Christians we believe that these show the hand of God at work, his amazing creativity and his ongoing power in maintaining life and existence.

I have often stood in nature and been overawed by its beauty. I have also stood in nature and found solace and peace. Being close to nature is recognised as being beneficial.

And in that creative power we can see and recognise God himself – his invisible power and divine nature. God’s plan was always that men and women lived as his children, in harmony with each other and with God. All are invited by to become God’s children. To share in his life and glory – remember the transfiguration earlier?

But it didn’t work out like that did it? We live in a world broken by man’s inhumanity to man, on a global stage and in everyday lives.

And this does not please God. God sees the world and humanity being exploited and it causes him grief and anger. Paul talks about it as the wrath of God.

When Paul uses this term ‘the wrath of God’ he is not describing a crazy, unhinged, wrathful deity who would splat humans and the world at the least provocation.

Understanding God’s anger is about understanding his love.

Let’s take an example. Many of you here are parents. Many parents experience their children growing to adulthood and going their own way. It is not unusual for young people to ignore advice and warnings, to do stupid things, even dangerous things. And as a parent you may get angry – not because you want to punish them, but because you love them. Your heart is stirred to anger when you see them doing stuff which you know might ruin their lives: drugs, gambling, pornography, theft. Love can be angry because it sees the loved ones messing up their lives wilfully and blindly.

That is how God feels. He made us as his children, all created in his image, with the spark of God’s life within: and yet we turn our backs and go our own way.

That does not however change how much he loves us. Think of Jesus’ compassion and acceptance of all and to all in his ministry. Think of the story of the prodigal son and loving father. God’s love is a love which longs to draw us back.

Which brings us to the truth about sin.

What is it about us humans which Paul regards as sin?

We may think of sin as actions, things which hurt others, God, ourselves.

Those things are sinful, but they spring from something deeper within.

Paul looks at why we sin. What is it about humans that makes us live in sinful ways?

*It is that* entity within that we can’t resist, the pull of sin, slavery to sin Paul calls it elsewhere. We see this in young children: children never need to be taught to be naughty!

This affinity with sin, this inner drive which we find hard to resist Paul describes as idolatry: he says:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Remember the context of this letter – a pagan world in which people did worship handmade idols.

Which of course we don’t worship today do we? But we live in a world which worships other things: what? Power, money, celebrity, sex, fashion, sport etc etc etc

Humanity has exchanged the worship of God for the worship of stuff. Holding anything higher than God makes it an idol – exchanging anything for God moves us away from the knowledge of his love. It’s about ego – I want, I need, I will put me first.

And idolatry is not a harmless thing – it has a very negative affect on us all. Sin hurts others and it hurts us. When we exchange the truth of God for a lie our thinking becomes futile, our hearts become darkened. And people go down a road of wanting more and more, and then worrying about what they have got! We are all on paths of searching for things that satisfy our deepest needs – but sometimes these are things which then draw us in deeper and take us over.

God loves us completely, but he also doesn’t interfere when we make our own way – that is part of love. So we are given over to the lusts and desires that we pursue.

God longs for his kindness to draw us to repentance – to turning from our ego-self to Himself. That is Paul’s message, but he also knows that apart from God we cannot achieve it.

Which brings us to the truth about us

Paul’s letter to the Romans is written to Gentiles and Jews. The Gentiles came from a pagan background and much of what Paul has said already clearly applies to them. They know what an idol is, they’ve worshipped them, but now they worship God.

But the letter is also to Jewish Christians. People who have grown up in the Jewish faith, who know God through their history, rituals, laws.

Perhaps as they hear the early part of Romans read out they’re thinking – well, that’s all aimed at these gentile folk, we are Jews, we are OK!

And as Christians we might be tempted to think that too – we believe, we come to church, we are all right!

But sorry! Paul says no! being a Jew, or a Chrisian, does not stop you from sinning! How easy it is to judge others for how they live – and yet we do not judge ourselves.

The church has a long sad history of this, and we are not immune today. There are many times I wince when I hear of the attitudes and actions of some Christians, but how do I measure up myself? Do I not judge others at times, do I not think things, do things, say things, which are wrong and hurtful?

Paul offends everyone in this letter, but he is in a sense just being factual. Telling it how it is. As he says: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Get it!

The fact is *that of ourselves*, none of us can measure up to God’s calling and life.

None of us alone have the power to overcome sinful desires, thoughts or actions.

Sin is like an infection which we all carry, and which shapes our thoughts, behaviours and lives. We can’t heal ourselves, or set ourselves free from it. We all need a doctor to heal us! A saviour to set us free!

So how can we live in the light of this? As we go our separate ways today what can we think to take us forward on this journey?

Here are some suggestions based on what we’ve thought about:

Spend time in nature, enjoying it, and asking God to speak to you through it.

Think about your life: what idols may be there to identify and get in their rightful place?

Think about our attitudes: Do we judge others? Do we welcome everyone or are we selective?

Or maybe God has pinpointed something else to you this morning, to go away and think about.

And so we some to the end of today’s session! Paul leaves us on a cliff edge – or rather a valley bottom.

But next week, next session he goes on to tell us what and how we may be saved and set free. It’s entitled: Salvation: What’s so amazing about grace?

So come along next Sunday – Eaton church 10.30 HC service, and let’s hear the good news together!!

But if you need to talk before then, please do come and chat after the service today, or at a convenient time.

Throughout history mankind has pursued other things than God. History is littered as far back as we know with war, poverty, crime and passion. There is very little harmony with each other, never mind with God.

Generations of humankind are guilty of using and abusing the world to further their own ends – it is something we are now acutely aware of because we are living in the repercussions of this.

But we also see much brokenness, a world torn apart by the impact of humanity – human greed, human exploitation, human life – which has and is systematically killing both people, and the life of our planet.

We think we can find the answers to life’s questions and needs by ourselves, but often we can’t see where the way we are going is leading – or we don’t care. Futile Paul calls it.