**Romans sermon series 1**

**4th February 2024** 10.30am Holy Communion St Egelwin’s, Scalford

**Reading: Romans 1. 1 - 7, 14 - 17**

1. **Gospel**

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – **2**the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures **3**regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, **4**and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. **5**Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. **6**And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. **7**To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

**14**I am a debtor both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. **15**That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. **16**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. **17**For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’

Today, we begin a ten part Sunday sermon series based on Dr Andrew Ollerton’s book *Romans: A Letter that Makes Sense of Life,* and the companion course he has produced with the Bible Society. Each session takes us on a journey that will help us discover more about our place in God’s story. Details of the themes are on one of the leaflets you should have received. This leaflet also contains information about *The Romans Course* which is being run on Monday evenings in St Mary’s Melton from 7.30 – 9.00 pm, starting tomorrow on 5th February. This course will include videos presented by Andrew Ollerton which are shot on location in Rome.

Our journey through Romans is pictured as being like climbing a mountain – and one of the other leaflets you have has a picture of 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 to out into practice what we’ve learned on the other side.”

Today we’re at basecamp, surveying the route. It is a route which many others have taken before us, for the Letter to the Romans has transformed lives ever since it was first written around the middle of the 1st century AD. Many well known figures testify to this fact, including St Augustine in the 4th century, Martin Luther in the 16th century, John Wesley in the 18th century, and more recently Sir David Suchet (otherwise known as Hercule Poirot) who became a Christian when he read Romans in a hotel room.

So how much do you and I know about this revolutionary letter, and what might it say to us in our day and age? Let’s see how many of the quiz questions we can answer by the end of the series!

**The author: Paul**

The very first word in today’s passage introduces us to the author, Paul – formerly Saul of Tarsus, a devout Pharisee who became a follower of Jesus after he met the Risen Lord and was ‘blinded by grace’ on the Road to Damascus. Paul now describes himself as ‘a servant of Christ Jesus’, literally a ‘slave’. It’s easy to overlook just how subversive an idea that really was. Paul was writing to those in a world where 30 per cent of Roman citizens were slaves, and every slave wanted to be free. Yet here is Paul proudly calling himself Christ’s servant, Christ’s slave.

Our culture today largely subscribes to an idea of freedom that says, ‘freedom means the complete absence of restrictions – nobody can tell you what to do!’ But Paul has a radically different understanding. For him, Jesus is the master who brings us perfect freedom.

**The recipient: the church in Rome**

So who, then, was Paul originally writing to? “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.” If we look at Chapter 16 at the end of Romans, we learn more about the Christians who gathered in house churches across Rome, also referred to as ‘the eternal city’. With more than 1 million residents, Rome dwarfed all other urban centres of that time – in fact no other European city reached that population until London did in the 18th century. If you’ve visited Rome - as I have - ruins like those of the Forum and Colosseum still speak of the glory days 2000 years ago. In Paul’s day Rome was the greatest cosmopolitan city anywhere – all roads led to Rome – and was a city of great diversity and contrasts. Such diversity and contrasts are clearly reflected in the membership of the early church in Rome. The list of names in Chapter 16 of Romans includes Greek, Latin and Jewish names, as well as those belonging to wealthy masters and poor slaves. It is also noteworthy how many women feature in leadership positions. Indeed it is likely that it was Phoebe, a church deacon and businesswoman, who first publicly read and explained Romans to the church in Rome.

Paul describes the believers in Rome as being “loved by God

and called to be his holy people.” But it is also clear that

Paul himself loves this church, and the personal nature of Paul’s greetings in Romans 16 speak of how deeply Paul cares for this community. Paul is not writing a dispassionate or theoretical letter; he is writing to people he loves, and for

whom he wants the best.

**The message: the Gospel**

What, then, was Paul’s message to the church in Rome? It was a message Paul believed that those in Rome really needed to hear, a message he summed up in one word: Gospel. The word ‘gospel’ simply means an announcement of ‘good news’ – eg like announcing the birth of a child, or another event to celebrate. And for Paul this good news was not new news.

Rather it was the news that has been promised right through the Old Testament. As Andrew Ollerton points out, Romans is shaped around the story of Israel. Chapters 1–3 unpack the themes of creation, Adam and the fall from Genesis; Romans 4 explores the call of Abraham; Romans 6–7 considers the exodus and the giving of the law, and Romans 8 depicts the arrival in the promised land. And, according to Paul, all God’s ancient promises to His people have come to their fulfilment in Jesus Christ “who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,  and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead.”

Romans is not, ultimately, about some big and complicated ideas, but about a person – Jesus Christ. In Him all of the promises of Scripture and longings of the human heart find their fulfilment. And Paul wanted everyone to know this good news about Jesus – “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”

The good news - the Gospel - is about what God has done for us through Jesus. Paul wants us know that, through His death on a cross and resurrection from the dead, Jesus has defeated our greatest enemies – sin, evil, and death. And this victory can be applied at 3 different levels - personal, relational, and cosmic. At the personal level, we can know forgiveness and freedom. At a relational level, human divisions are healed as all are united in Christ. And at a cosmic level - as we shall consider more fully when we get to Romans 8 - the gospel is also about the renewal of the whole of creation.

**Conclusion: How do we live in the light of this?**

Paul wanted to share “the gospel of God” because he was totally convinced of two things: first, that the risen Jesus has won the decisive victory over our greatest enemies; and, second, that through God’s own totally righteous and utterly faithful character, all are welcome into the Lord’s family.

What about you and me? Paul says “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” How confident are we in the power of the gospel today? On a scale of 1 to 5 – where 1 is ‘plagued by doubt’, 2 is ‘very uncertain’, 3 is ‘up and down’, 4 is ‘mostly confident’, and 5 is ‘fully assured’ – where would you and I put ourselves at the moment? Whatever our starting point - and mine is further back than I’d like – hopefully our confidence will increase, as we journey through Romans together over the coming weeks.

If you would like some homework before next Sunday, then how about setting aside some time to read through Romans this week - it will take about an hour in one sitting. There is real value in reading the letter as a whole, rather than just in isolated chunks, as it helps us to appreciate the sweep of Paul’s argument. Or you may wish to have a look at the section we’re covering next Sunday – from Romans 1.18 to 3.23. Or again, you might want to consider joining the course taking place in Melton on Monday evenings – do let me know if you’d like to. Next Sunday morning, Sue will be speaking at Village Morning Worship in Waltham, and I’ll be doing so at the Communion service in Stonesby – both at 10.30.

**Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank You for Paul’s wonderful letter and all we have heard today. Please be with us throughout this series as we explore the book of Romans. Open our eyes to the depth and beauty of the gospel so that we may have a richer grasp of all that You have done in the past and all that You continue to do in us today. Lord, help us not to be ashamed, confused or quiet about the gospel. Teach us through Romans so that we may be more confident in You and share our love for You more openly and widely. Amen.