

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August, Trinity X****Romans 11:1-2, 28-32 (Genesis 12:1-4, Matthew 15:21-28)*****So what about the Jews?***

A few weeks ago I said that if there was such an album as St Paul: The Greatest Hits, you would definitely expect to see Romans Chapter 8 on it. You remember? The whole creation groaning, waiting for the revelation of the glorious liberty of the children of God. Other chapters would have a strong claim too. 1 Corinthians 13: now we see in a glass darkly, then we shall face to face. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 15: grave, where is thy victory? Death, where is thy sting? Paul had many greatest hits.

Among them, though, he himself would (I suspect) specially emphasise Romans Chapter 11. There he tries to work out one of his biggest, most personally painful theological puzzles. Why is it that the Jews by and large had not become Christians? Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. He was the one they'd all been waiting for. Everything in the Scriptures, Paul thought, came true in him. He is the great Yes to all God's promises. So why didn't the people of the promise think so? How could God let that happen? And given that it did, what now for the Jews? I ask then, says Paul, has God rejected his people?

That's the opening question of Romans 11. And for most of Christian history, the answer of the Church to that question has been pretty unambiguous: Yes. God has rejected his people. They killed Jesus. They shouted for Barabbas and sent Jesus to the Cross, saying his blood be upon us and upon our children. What then, said the Church, shall God do with the Jews? He will come and destroy them, and give the vineyard – the kingdom - to others. And when a few decades later the Temple was burned down by the Romans and all the Jews expelled from Jerusalem, the Church thought: there you go: divine judgement. The Jews were destined to wander the earth, bearing their curse, and the Church was only too pleased to persecute and punish them right throughout history.

It is almost impossible to overstate the hatred and violence Christianity has poured out against the Jews. And in the end, that road led to the Holocaust. Now, of course, other factors were in play too. It wasn't *just* Christianity that caused the killing. But we were guilty enough that afterwards, most of the Church stood back with horror and thought *my God*. This is where hating Jews gets you. This is what some of our teaching, some of our rhetoric, some of our stories at the very least paves the way for. There was a Protestant chaplain to one of the mass shooting squads, who years after the war was on trial for his share in the massacres of Jews in Poland. An educated ordained minister, like me. What was his defence? : *'these acts were the fulfilment of the self-condemnation which the Jews had brought upon themselves before the tribunal of Pontius Pilate.'* In other words, the Jews had it coming. They got what they deserved, because of what they did to Jesus. His blood be upon us, and upon our children.

Now thank God, most of the Church saw that this was so horrific, so appalling, that what happened in the fifty or so years after 1945 was perhaps the single biggest change in church teaching ever. And a big part of it was to do with actually listening to what Paul says in Romans 11. I ask then, has God rejected his people? *By no means. God has not rejected his people, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.* In other words, the Jews remain the people of God. They remain the chosen people. And Gentiles, non-Jews, need to be very careful about despising them. This is the whole point what we've just read about the tree. You Gentile Christians, he says, you've now been allowed into God's people. You're a bit like branches from one tree, being grafted onto another. But make no mistake, the tree is fundamentally Jewish. The root is Jewish. The life is Jewish. You're being allowed to share it, but don't think for one moment that means you can despise Jews or look down on them. Everything you have, comes through them.

In fact, Paul says, and this is for him the really daring bit – maybe that's why God allowed them to say no to Jesus. Because they said no, that's why the message went instead to the Gentiles. It's as if when the Jews handed Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion, they were doing something far more profound without even knowing it – they really were giving God to the Gentiles. Their 'no' became the occasion through which Romans and Egyptians and Greeks and English could say 'yes'. *A hardening has come upon part of Israel*, Paul says, *until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.* And when the Gentiles have come in, well then, the hardening will cease and all Israel will be saved. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable: even if the Jews, for the moment, say no, one glorious day all God's promises for them will come true.

Well – what on earth are you meant to make of all this?

Well, the first thing might be to say that maybe, we don't agree with it. Paul is on a kind of freewheeling theological speculation here, and there's all sorts of aspects to it that we might have questions about. To take just one: he seems to think that in the end, somehow, all Jews will come to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Most Jews would find that notion somewhat offensive, if not ridiculous; and many Christians would be deeply uncomfortable with it. Largely speaking, the Church has given up actively trying to convert Jews. Even forty year ago it would have been a respectable Christian activity – now, not so much.

However, park that issue, which is a complicated one. Focus instead on Paul's warning to Gentile Christians – that is, to you and me – not to vaunt ourselves over the Jews. Not to look down on them spiritually. Now you might think we do no such thing, and of course we generally don't, not in the blatant and extreme ways that our ancestors did. We don't actually burn synagogues. Good for us. But there are subtler ways in which two thousand years worth of anti-Semitism has still left its mark, even on nice, good, liberal Christians.

So think, for instance, of all those sermons which say that Jews think – or at least, in Jesus' day *thought* – that religious rules are more important than loving behaviour. That staying pure is more important than love and mercy. Or that God only loved them, and everyone else was second class at best. Or that that they thought pleasing God was all about keeping the rules of the big, angry, punishing God, that their religion is all about being good and they have no comprehension of grace and God as a loving father. Most of this, I'm sorry to tell you, is pure Christian propaganda. Yes, alright, you might find some Jews who once said something you could misunderstand like that. You might even find a very few who really thought it. But believe me they are unrepresentative, and I can find you Christians who have thought far worse. So the next time you hear that sort of propaganda – frankly, that sort of poison - from this pulpit or another, challenge it. Politely, but challenge it.

Or what about how nice, liberal, good people tend to speak about the behaviour of the State of Israel? Now please do not mistake me. That State is not perfect, and its current Government even less so. They have both done dreadful things. All true. But, the fact remains, there is a certain kind of critic – and many of them are Christians – who get very, very upset about Israel, who compare it to the Nazis, who blame it for everything, who view it in almost demonic terms, who go strangely quiet when it comes to criticising States whose behaviour is by any measure far, far worse. Of course, not all criticism of Israel is Jew hatred. Of course not. But let us not be naïve. A lot of it is. And given Christian history, we of all people have a duty to be on our guard against that. Don't hold Israel to standards you won't apply to Saudi, or Pakistan, or China, or indeed us. Don't just believe every allegation that's thrown. Investigate them, fairly, and with some degree of empathy for a people that within living memory our fine European Christian culture tried to exterminate.

I ask then. Has God rejected his people? By no means. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. The Jews are our brothers and sisters in faith. Let's start treating them that way.

To the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus be glory now and forever. Amen.