

Sermon – ‘Where faith is found’

Paul is the master of the run-on sentence. In the opening seven verses of the epistle to the Roman believers, he offers his own credentials, a summary of the gospel, and a few words about the goal of his teaching, and a greeting – all while barely pausing for a breath. One sentence, that spans the first seven verses of the opening chapter:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

He has never met his audience – though not for lack of trying. He wants to share the gospel with them – that is the task to which God has called him – so for now, a letter must do. But we would be mistaken if we imagined that the folks in Rome are entirely dependent on Paul to hear the Good News.

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.” Paul doesn’t say how, but the word has reached Rome ahead of him. This may surprise us, as we are used to thinking of the story of the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a very linear way all based on how we encounter the Scriptures.

The New Testament moves neatly from the end of the gospel of John to the Acts of the Apostles, and we often read it as a continuous narrative. The chronology is a little more complicated than that.

Paul lets us know right away that even in ‘far-flung Rome’ the gospel is known – ‘your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.’ Paul is not the first witness for Christ – he is one in a long line of faithful followers.

The opening chapter of Romans is also interesting in that it shows a part of Paul's character that we don't easily see. Paul can often come across as a hard liner – silencing women and going on at length about the finer points of this newly developing and often changeable Christian doctrine. But it seems he is still willing and able to be open-minded.

He writes of mutual encouragement; of the debt he owes to 'both Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish...' He is eager to share what he knows – and to learn from those who have heard and encountered the faith in different circumstances. And while it's true that Paul will become the most widely known of those who seek to share the story of Jesus (and the most insistent, the most zealous, the one most eager for folks to 'get it right') – he is here showing some measure of Christ-like humility. And I wonder what we might learn from that?

It is sometimes tempting – when things seem bleak and churches struggle – to offer a call for folks to 'get back to basics' where faith is concerned. What that often means is that somewhere along the way we imagine that the faithful have taken a wrong turn, and lost the plot where the gospel is concerned. The so called 'main-line Protestants' (among whom the Presbyterians are counted) have been worrying their way through the last several generations looking for answers to declining attendance and the indifference to our message shown by the world around us.

Our approach to faith - and questions about our efforts to share the faith – have badgered and bothered us for almost 50 years. We act as though the Christian faith depended entirely on us. We talk about the loss of churches and imagine that means the death of faith. And nothing could be further from the truth.

Just as Paul knew that faith was waiting for him in Rome, faith in our time is a remarkably nimble and dynamic enterprise. The news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection seems to have spread on the wind. The first mutterings of a miracle very quickly became the framework for a community that worshipped hope and peace and life abundant. It didn't take a program of preaching, or a catechism, or a carefully managed system of church government to convince Paul's Roman correspondents to trust in the love of God made known in Jesus. The Spirit got there first. Faith finds a way.

We can be encouraged by the notion that the Christian faith does not depend on us. Faith does not live or die according to our effort or our energy. We are invited to share faith – to have faith – to keep the faith – but the bottom line is that we are always part of something bigger. We are adding our own experiences with God to a long and diverse list of experiences. Faith is a growing, adaptable, remarkable thing, and wherever we go as a church – wherever we go as followers of Jesus – there is an experience of faithfulness waiting for us.

Like Paul, we ought to approach the unknown with a sense of shared enterprise. The future has as much to teach us as the past. Faith is also found in the unknown – in the chance meeting – in the stranger. We take what we know about Jesus with us – and lo and behold Jesus meets us in those new surroundings, and offers new learning and new revelation.

Paul longed for those lessons that would come from the sharing of different ideas. Perhaps there is hope for us yet, if we choose to face the future with humility and courage, sure that the Spirit has gone ahead of us – that faith will find a way.