

ROMANS 15

I love Paul's letter to the Romans. I am very familiar and have got my head around the earlier chapters. In fact, Romans chapter 8 is one of my favourite chapters in the whole bible. However by the time I get to the end of chapter 13, and I don't know if this is true for anyone else, but usually I've run out of energy and steam for the rest of the letter! There's such an amazing amount of teaching packed into the beginning of Romans isn't there? It feels if I go on any further my head will explode!!

Honestly, before preparing for today, I've never really studied Romans 15 properly. When Robin asked me to preach on it my first thought was, is there really anything to learn from Romans 15? After all it is the penultimate chapter and is probably just summing up and bringing to a conclusion the rest of the letter - on which we have already had superb teaching from Robin, Dave, Alan and Meadon.

I shouldn't have really been so blasé about it though because God has massively challenged me with a chapter that before today I had not really given two thoughts about.

So before we begin looking into what Paul says and teaches I would just like to ask you two questions. They're questions that if I am honest I don't really want to answer myself. I also think, that if you're like me they're two questions that you can give two different answers. The most often answer I give is the one that I can use to justify where I am in life ie. my situation, what I like doing, my excuses etc. And then there is the other answer, the one that I know deep down is the one that I should give every time and the one that God desperately and longs to hear from me. So the questions that God has really challenged me personally with and also that I believe He wants to ask us are:

1. What are we really, honestly, deep down inside ourselves living for? Day-to-day, what do we fill our lives with?
2. How do we please our fellow believers?

Let's start by reading Romans 15:1-6

A good summary of that little section of the chapter would be christian unity, modelled by Christ, encouraged by scripture.

PICTURES OF VENICE ON SCREEN

Does anyone know what city is in these pictures?

Venice.

Has anyone here been to Venice? It's amazing isn't it, especially the aerial picture taken from above. What an amazing achievement of those people many centuries ago who built the city. Perhaps it is just as amazing as the people today who are propping it up and stopping it sink into the water. That aerial picture makes it look like the whole city is floating in the water. Part river, part sea and hundreds of canals making there way past many ancient buildings. How did they build a city like this on the water?

The answer to that question is given if you study any of the history of the city. PICTURE OF BELL TOWER. The bell tower in the picture is in St Marks square. In 1902 the original bell tower developed cracks and fell down. The people of Venice decided it must be rebuilt, and when they studied the original foundations they found that they were not sufficient. So in 1912 they drove hundreds of piles down into the floor of the lagoon, spreading out into a wide area and they rebuilt the tower as you can now see in the picture. Of course, you can't see the foundations, but if they weren't there the new tower would not only fall down but it would damage the rest of the square as well.

Sometimes trying to live the Christian life is a bit like trying to build a city on the water. There are so many different things to consider, and different people can have different opinions on what the bible says. This can mean that sometimes we are not sure what our own minds think, let alone God's and we can find ourselves floundering around in the water. When this happens we usually take the path of least resistance and do whatever seems to be the easiest at the time.

The trouble is, if we live our Christian lives like this we are heading for a crash, or excusing the pun a big splash!!

What we all need is firm and deep foundations for all our behaviour, as individuals and corporately as a Christian family. Paul hinted at this foundation all through chapter 14. It should perhaps be no surprise that the foundations of our lives should be the Messiah himself, and the Bible as it explains the significance of what Jesus accomplished.

Let's just have a look at verse 4 now. "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Paul is teaching us here how the Bible is meant to function in our Christian living. He is of course talking of what we now call the Old Testament, as not much of the New Testament would have existed when he wrote to the Romans. Paul's teaching on a Christian use of the Old Testament is very clear. It is written for us to learn from, so that with the Bible in our hands and hearts we might have the courage to live in patience and hope. Or to put it another way, the Bible is the earlier part of the story that we are now living in and explains the roots from which we have grown.

You would be surprised how many Christians in the world today fail to grasp this simple lesson. Just this week we heard David Cameron telling us how he is a pick and choose Christian and that he doesn't think you have to apply all of the rules! Some people disregard the whole of the Old Testament, maybe thinking that with the coming of Christ it is somehow redundant. On the other end of the scale, some Christians have decided that all of the Old Testament, as it stands, is still valid: they have even gone as far as suggesting that the temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt and sacrifices should be started again in obedience with Old Testament instruction. Also others, knowing that the New Testament explicitly declares various parts of the Old Testament to be redundant (ie. The letter to the Hebrews argues in detail about the sacrificial system), have tried to set out rules for deciding which bits of the Old Testament are valid and which aren't.

Paul's theology was based believing that Jesus was and is the Messiah, and he would have said that the last group of people, although probably on the right track were not going about it in the right way. Paul believed that the whole Old Testament forms the God given story of how the Covenant people (the Jews) were called to bring God's salvation to the good but fallen creation. This involved the Jews, and their ultimate representative Jesus the Messiah in terrible suffering. However, now that the Messiah had come and fulfilled all of what the Old Testament had been moving towards the Bible should be read not as a story with an ending, but the foundation for God's great achievement in Jesus. Suddenly from looking at it that way it becomes an enormous encouragement to faithful, patient Christian living.

So how does Paul apply this way at looking at the Old Testament to Jesus the Messiah and the ongoing life of his people?

In verse 3, he says “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written” and then he quotes Psalm 69:9 “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

Even Jesus was not able to please himself. This links to what Paul says in other letters, eg. Phillipians 2:6-8 and 2 Corinthians 8:9 where Jesus humbles himself, giving up honours which were His by right to be obedient to God’s saving plan.

At the start of this chapter in verse 1 Paul appeals to “the strong”. He is saying that the renouncing of rights, the humbling of oneself and becoming a servant, all of which Jesus did during his life on earth is the same path that Christians must walk to put the ongoing work of God, his saving plan into practice.

In the armed forces when you go through your initial training you are basically broken down. You are worked and drilled so hard that in the end any resistance left in you has gone. You lose your individuality, and then when you are at your lowest you are put back together as an ultimate warrior.

In this way the military creates unity by getting rid of individuality and urging uniformity. It’s not great, but in war it is a case of kill or be killed and it is the only way to create an army all of one accord from people of vary different backgrounds and levels of discipline.

In verse 5, Paul talks about unity, and in Phillipians 2:1-5 he appeals to us that we should be like minded.

Some Christians would like to see the military style uniformity in the transforming of minds. I suppose if you think about it churches would be less likely to split if everyone who attended thought the same, behaved the same, worshipped the same and dressed the same!

However, Paul is not talking about a military style of unity and uniformity. He insists that as Christians we should learn to think and act the same way as Jesus. The point of what Paul is saying here is not just to live in peace and quiet without arguing and disagreeing. The point is to build; and what needs to be built is the common life of praise and worship. We read in verse 6, “So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This “with one heart” and “with one mouth” in a glad unanimity of praise and worship shows the world and to other Christians that we are not just worshipping a local God, the God derived from our culture and situations but the One True God of all the world.

Lets read Romans 15.7-13.

We are now getting close to end of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Do you remember right back at the beginning, Paul set out the gospel of Jesus Christ which he has been commissioned to announce among all the nations (Jew and gentile.) The main content of the gospel was Jesus, as the son of David and the Son of God. Jesus who has risen from the dead, Jesus who is now the Lord of all the world.

As we have just read Paul is making more statements in the same theme. In verse 9 he quotes passage after passage showing that God always intended to bring all the nations of the world into equal fellowship with his chosen people the Jews. I personally love the last one from Isaiah 11:10, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over all the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.”

That one who arises is Jesus, with the resurrection bringing Him in as the world’s true Lord. All the nations are summoned to worship Him, to submit to Him, and in this verse in particular to

have HOPE in Him. Jesus will not rule with a rod of iron bringing God's judgement on the nations. He will rule in such a way as to bring hope to the whole world, something that the world is desperate for today.

In these couple of verses, Paul summarises the whole gospel and it's purpose of bringing Jews and Gentiles together into a single family. The acceptance which Christians from different backgrounds must offer one another (verse 7) comes straight from the basic Christian story, which Paul summarises here in fewer words than any of his other letters.

Jesus, the Messiah became a servant to the Jews to demonstrate God's truthfulness. It was specifically to establish the promises that God made back in the beginning to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The aim of those promises was never that Israel would simply be a great nation, superior to all others. It was always so that through Israel, God would call people from every nation into the one family of salvation and praise. Paul declares triumphantly that is what has now been done through Jesus the Messiah, and all that now remains is for the call to go out - the summons to obedience, faith and above all else worship.

Just as in Romans 1:4 where Paul emphasised that God's affirmation of Jesus took place by the power of the Holy Spirit, also here in verse 14 he prays in the same power. The power that will surge through any Christian community, and enable it to live at peace, in unity, hold firm the faith and above all else abound in hope. Imagine if we earnestly took verse 13 and turned it into a prayer for our church, our town, our country. Imagine what God would do, "May the God of hope fill you all with joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Not be filled up, not have a bit more but overflow!

Later on in the chapter Paul talks of planning to visit Rome and of the aid that is sent for the church in Jerusalem from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. That generosity of the churches in sending aid links back to the very beginning of the chapter.

Paul says in verse 1, 2 & 7, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failing of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

These are probably the three hardest verses in the whole chapter, the ones that I have struggled with the most. For a start, who are the strong, who are the weak? Would I say that I am strong, am I weak? We could probably go really in depth with it and still be going around in circles. I mean, in one sense on a big Christian scale we are all weak compared to Jesus. You might be weaker than the person sat next to you, but they may be weaker than the person sat next to them. And you might be stronger than the person sat behind or in front of you. As you can see this verse has bothered me for over a week! And then I finally got it.... It doesn't actually matter whether I am weak or strong. Paul isn't pointing the finger here, he's not saying all the strong ones on the left you have got to bear with all these weak ones on the right, it's about living in true Christian unity. But, and here's the bit God is really challenging me personally.... As we discovered earlier Christian unity is not all being the same, it's not about us all doing our best to get along, it's about us all striving to have the same mind as Christ and follow Him. It's about being His representative here, in this place this time, a small representation of God's righteousness.

It's about always looking out for each other, always wanting the best for each other, always accepting each other. Just as Christ

bears our failings, just as Christ wants the best for us, just as Christ accepts us.

In Acts 2, the early church was in a constant state of revival and unity. It seems that from reading through Acts there were five unifying factors. In Acts 2:1 we see that they were united by prayer that brought them to one accord in one place. The second unifying factor was a common salvation experience, ie. salvation only through Jesus Christ. The third was the early Church continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine. That is a belief in the teaching that Jesus gave to the Apostles. The fourth was that Unity was promoted in the early church through fellowship. Fellowship here from the greek work koinonia, which means partnership. Breaking bread together was a key feature of the early church - they shared meals, they got to know each other. And lastly, they had all things in common. They were genuinely concerned with the physical needs of other believers and were willing to do without or sell their possessions so everyone could have their material needs met.

You know what looking at the first three, prayer, common salvation and faith in Jesus teaching a I think that maybe most Christians and churches are good at. But the challenging two, the one that God is really challenging me with is the fellowship and the pleasing our neighbour.

And this is where it ties in with Romans chapter 15. Paul understood how important this unity was, without it revival would stop. The spreading of the gospel would stop.

And like I said before God is really challenging me with this at the moment.

How often today do we share meals with each other? We can be so busy now with our own things, family activities etc. that we

rarely get time to share a meal with fellow Christians. If we're really honest, a lot of the time we only have surface relationships with other believers, but Christ gave us the Church so that we can edify one another. But how can we edify each other if we don't know our friends in the church properly. Surely we can only know them properly if we spend quality time together in each others homes?

Jesus himself was also desperate for those that came after him to live in this unity. Jesus very last prayer before He was arrested and crucified was the prayer for all believers. He could of prayed for anything, but He chose to pray for unity. John 17:1 "My prayer is not for them alone (the disciples), I pray also for those who will believe in me though their message (all who believed after - including us), that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me, and have loved them, even as you have loved me."

So the question that I'm starting to ask myself is, when did we all get so busy?

If anyone asks me how I am at the moment, I tend to reply. Well I'm constantly tired, looking after children is 24:7, you just don't have time for anything else. In a way I'm sort of pleased that I'm so busy, I think well where could I possibly fit anything else in.

If I am really honest with you now, I'm not really that busy. The reason I think I am is because I have filled my life with other stuff. Other stuff I feel that I deserve or have the right to, but being brutally honest here with myself not stuff that is really essential to my life. The big thing that I have filled my life with at the moment

is television. It got to the point that if we were not at home I was always making sure something was recording what I wanted to watch. My favourites are programs like Mythbusters. The other thing that fills my life is gadgets. I just love them.

It was so bad that if I forgot to record something or I didn't have the latest tech I was mortified. It's funny isn't it but these things that we fill our lives with somehow become a matter of life and death, essential.

The other thing I should say is that none of these things that we fill our lives with are bad. It's not a sin to watch tv or own an iphone.

However, God really spoke to me a few months ago about my time. How I was kidding myself about being busy.

The other thing that you should know about me is that I am desperate to see revival. I am convinced it is going to happen here at Oasis, here in our town Redditch. As many of you know it's already happening in Wales, Runcorn, Hull and London and probably other places as well.

But God's has told me it's not going to happen in my life whilst I am still busy filling it up with other stuff!

So now, just take a few moments, maybe close your eyes and ask yourself those two questions. What am I truly, day-to-day living for? What do I fill my life with? And How am I pleasing my fellow believers? It may be that you are already filling your life with the things the Church in Acts did, and this letter to the Romans is a massive encouragement to you as it was for the Church in Rome. If that's the case then Praise God - keep going, keep pushing, keep seeking. If your like me, and could do better (and I could do a lot better) then let's thank God that we are

never condemned. As Paul says in Romans 8, Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. Hallelujah! Who knows that once you have given your life to Christ you are never condemned? You are now only ever convicted by the Holy Spirit to change!! So if you are like me and could do better, once we've thanked God let's also pray that we'll de-clutter, we want to move deeper, we want to be an active part of the body of Christ living in proper Christian unity.

So, let's just take a few moments.

Now, that was actually the easy part!

Do we really want revival? Do we want to see God move here in Oasis and Redditch in a powerful way? Do we want to see people saved, people disciplined, people healed, people delivered, people set free? Do we want to see God explode out of this place and reach the unreachable?