

Romans 1:18-2:29 (Reading 1:18-32) – What’s Wrong with the World?

What do you make of Romans 1:18-32? It’s a bit strong, isn’t it? Why did Paul write this to the Christians in the city of Rome?

Reading Romans in Context

To understand any letter properly, we need to know something of the context in which it was written. Let me give you an example. Here is a genuine letter. What do you think it’s about?

I am afraid that I have never been a very useful member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, so I know it will make very little difference to you whether I resign, or whether I continue to be a member of your organization. However, I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist. You have set an example which seems to me unfortunate, and I feel obliged to send in to you my resignation. You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed.

I realize that many people will not agree with me, but feeling as I do this seems to me the only proper procedure to follow.

Very sincerely yours ...

What do you think this letter is about?

The Daughters of the American Revolution was an organisation of women who could trace ancestry to someone who had fought in the American Revolution. It was a wealthy organisation that had built and ran Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. This letter was written in 1939 by Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, resigning as a member of The Daughters of the American Revolution. She did this because they had refused to allow the great African American opera singer Marian Anderson to perform in Constitution Hall. It was a brave letter because it endangered the support for her husband, particularly from the southern states.

Understanding the context sheds light on the letter. Suddenly we really begin to understand the letter and its significance.

If we are to understand correctly the letter to the Romans, we need to know something of the situation that Paul was addressing.

Paul is writing to a church which is made up partly of Jewish Christians, Jews who, like Paul, had recognised that Jesus was their long promised Messiah, and Gentile, or non-Jewish (Greek, see 1:14) Christians, Gentiles who had come to embrace Jesus as Saviour of the world. These two groups were not getting on well together. They were arguing over what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ – arguing over what foods you could eat; arguing over the Old Testament Law and its regulations such as the Sabbath. And they were sitting in judgment on one another.

This is the context into which Paul writes this Letter to the Romans.

Romans 1:18-32

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul is adopting a particular “voice” – a device often adopted by preachers. In these verses he is describing the Roman or Greek world of his day, but he is describing it from a particular *perspective*. Notice how he continually speaks about “them” in these verses – that terrible group of people. The words “them”, “they”, “their”, “themselves” are used about 25 times in these 14 verses. This is a description of what “*they*” are like.

Who is he speaking about here, and from what perspective is he speaking about them? He is speaking about the Roman or Gentile world from the perspective of traditional, orthodox Judaism. This is how the Jews viewed the Gentiles – Gentile dogs as they would sometimes call them. This is how Saul the Pharisee viewed the non-Jewish world. “They” – the people who are not like us – are godless and morally corrupt. The way “they” live is disgusting.

And we can imagine how many of the Jewish Christians in Rome were nodding in agreement as this passage was read to them. Yes! That's just what we think of the Roman world, the world within which we are compelled to live. Yes, that's what "they" are like.

Romans 2

But then comes Paul's hammer blow in Romans chapter 2 when he turns his attention from the Gentile world to his fellow Jews. *You* Jews, he says, have nothing to boast about.

Again, Paul is speaking from personal experience. Now that he has come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, he sees that all that he previously boasted in as Saul the Pharisee is just so much trash. We cannot pretend to any moral superiority.

See then how he turns in Romans 2:1 to criticise his fellow Jews for their judgmental attitude towards the Gentiles:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

We can imagine the heads of his Jewish Christian hearers had stopped nodding and they are now protesting: "We have never lived like *them*" How can you say we do the same things?"

Listen to what Paul says in 2:17-24:

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Remember, Paul writes from personal experience. You / we, he says, have failed to live by the law we boasted of. We did not love our neighbours as ourselves. We stole from God what was his due – the humble and glad service we owed him. We committed adultery – going after idols of our own making even as we professed to abhor idols. Our calling, says Paul, as God's chosen people was to be a light to the Gentiles, but because of your self-righteousness and hypocrisy God's name has become a term of abuse among the nations.

And as if all that were not enough, now listen to Paul's shocking words in verse 9, "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." No doubt the Jewish Christians had delighted to hear that the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ was "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (1:16), but now Paul reminds them that this is true also of the judgment of God – first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. There is no special treatment because you are a Jew: "God does not show favouritism" (2:11)

This whole passage deserves much closer study, but time does not permit it here. Paul goes on to talk about those who have no knowledge of God's revelation and yet live exemplary lives. They are not all the same. The bottom line of Paul's argument is that Jews and non-Jews have equally fallen short of what God has created and called us to be. There is no room left for pride in ourselves. There is no room left for a judgmental attitude towards others who are "not like us"; there is no room for looking down on others.

But now for the Good News

But that's not all that Paul has to say. Paul does not write to these Christians in Rome with a message of condemnation; he writes to them with a message of salvation and of hope. As he says immediately before the passage we read this evening:

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. (Romans 1:16)

The gospel, the good news, is about the power of God to put right what has gone wrong. The gospel is not a set of doctrines to be learnt and recited but is the declaration of what God has done in Christ to mend and transform a broken world. The gospel is more than about how I can be forgiven for my sins and be sure of a place in heaven; it is about God's purposes and plans for the restoration of all that he has made.

It's about the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead. All that was wrong with the world – its alienation from God and rebellion against him; human self-seeking, greed and self-importance – found its focus that day at Calvary as sinful humankind, Jew and Gentile together, nailed Jesus to the cross and sought to do away with God. But Jesus Christ triumphed over sin and death. By his resurrection he has become the beginning of the new creation – of a world made new.

And that same power that raised Jesus from the dead can transform lives today. That's what Paul was saying in the first century and that's what we are saying in the twenty first – for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His power can transform lives – the immoral Gentile, the hypocritical Jew, and people today from every ethnic group, language and background.

Christ is creating for himself a people from every nation, tribe and tongue, and making them one new people in him. He is in the business of breaking down the walls that divide peoples. By his power he is healing what is broken and spoilt in anticipation of that day when he will return and *all things* will be made new.

That's Paul's message, and that's our message also.

How does this passage speak to us?

What do we think is wrong with our world? Well its "them", isn't it.

In the past it was the Jews. To solve the problems of the world we need to get rid of "them".

Today it's the Muslims, Somalis, the Polish...

The media often reinforce this message, "It's all the fault of *them*". So they play on our prejudices, stir up our hatred for "the other" and ensure that we always have someone else to blame for the state of the world – or at least the state of our own world; it reinforces the divisions between peoples. The media often encourages a judgmental attitude – "It's all their fault".

The story is told that *The Times* once asked G K Chesterton to write something for them on "What's wrong with the world?" His response to them was very brief: he wrote, "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G K Chesterton"

What's wrong with the world? It's not "them", it's "us", it's "me!"

What can heal the world? It's not getting rid of "them", it's getting rid of me.

Jesus Christ alone can heal the world – through his death and resurrection power. We are healed when we die with him and rise to live a new life by his power – when "I no longer live but Christ lives in me", the old me is gone.

Christ alone can mend our lives and make all things new.

We are called to stand out against the judgmental spirit of our age. Our calling is to know Christ and the power of his Spirit that we might become a people through whom the world is healed. Not sitting in judgment on the world – "look at *them* and how *they* behave" – but, as Christ lives in us, becoming truly "a light to those in darkness" as we "declare the praises of him who has brought *us* out of darkness into his wonderful light." Proclaiming the good news about the one who can mend what is broken and heal what is hurt, the good news of Christ crucified and risen. Proclaiming the one who is the hope of the world, the one at whose coming all things will be made new.

Will we be a light to those who are in darkness, or will the name of our glorious God be blasphemed because of what people see in us and because of our judgmental attitudes to them?

14/9/2014 – Peter Misselbrook