

# **ROMANS**

**The Letter of Paul  
to the Church  
in Rome**

Luke tells us that while still in Ephesus, Paul discerned in prayer ('in the Spirit') that Christ wanted him to 'go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said: "After I have gone there, I must also see Rome"' (Acts 19:21). According to the proximate time chart which we are following, Paul left Ephesus after Pentecost 55, heading for Macedonia. While in Macedonia Titus brought him news of Corinth and he wrote ahead to Corinth telling them that he was on his way (2Corinthians 1-9). It was to be a pastoral visit aimed at reconciling hurt feelings and encouraging the community in its faith (see 2Corinthians 1:15-2:2; 6:11-13). He was hoping to receive from them a generous contribution towards the collection for the Jerusalem church (see 2Corinthians 9:1-5). It was also an opportunity for him to say farewell. It is likely that he would have had this letter delivered in late 55AD before winter set in.

He spent the winter of 55-56 in Macedonia and then made a missionary excursion into western Macedonia and Illyricum (see Romans 15:19). It seems that some time during this excursion he heard from Titus that things were not going well in Corinth, and so he wrote again, forcefully defending the authenticity of his apostolic ministry (2Corinthians 10-13). He arrived in Corinth towards the end of 56 and spent the winter of 56-57 there. During his stay he took the opportunity to compose the letter to the Romans.

It is clear from the list of greetings with which Paul concludes the letter that the community included Jews and Gentiles. This is clear also from the content of the letter. We have evidence that there were Jews in Rome as early as the second century BC. Their numbers were greatly swelled by the prisoners of war brought back as slaves by Pompey when he took control of Judah in 63BC and incorporated it into the province of Syria. Fifty thousand has been suggested as the Jewish population of Rome in the middle of the first century BC, composed mainly of slaves, or ex-slaves (freedmen), and merchants. We have no direct information about the origins of Christianity in Rome, though we do know that the community had close ties with Jerusalem. It is possible that Christianity was introduced by pilgrims present in Jerusalem during the first Pentecost after Jesus' death (see Acts 2:10,41). It may have been introduced by Jewish-Christian slaves in the household of Aristobulus or Narcissus (see commentary on 16:10-11). It is unlikely that Peter was in Rome in 56AD. If he was, Paul gives no indication of having heard about it; and Luke says nothing of it in *Acts*.

It is important to realise that we have no evidence that there had been a break between Christians and Jews in Rome at the time Paul is writing. The final chapter of *Acts* gives the opposite impression. It may well be that the Jewish Christians and the 'righteous Gentiles' who had come to Christianity through them were still meeting in the synagogue and relating to the wider Jewish community. In fact it is hard to see how they could have met in any other way within the restrictions of Roman law. Even if the edict of expulsion issued by Claudius (see Acts 18:2) was because of disputes about Christ, as Suetonius seems to say (*Life of Claudius* 25.4), it seems only to have involved one out of the many synagogues in Rome. In any case, the contacts between Paul and the Jewish leaders upon his arrival in Rome indicate an ongoing relationship between Jews and Christians.

From the greetings at the close of the letter, it is clear that Prisca and Aquila are back in Rome (16:3). The edict of Claudius would have lapsed at his death in 54AD. Perhaps they returned to Rome to prepare the way for Paul. In any case they would have been an excellent source of information for Paul about conditions in the Christian community there. Paul had been wanting to come to Rome ‘for many years’ (15:23; also 1:13). He may have had this already in mind when he crossed over to Macedonia six years previously. Philippi and Thessalonica are on the Via Egnatia which stretched across to west Macedonia and the Adriatic. A short crossing to Brindisi linked up with the Via Appia and so Rome. However, whatever Paul’s plans may have been, he was forced to leave the Via Egnatia and head south, to Beroea, then Athens and then Corinth. In any case, the demands of his ministry, first in Achaia and then in Asia, kept him in the east. Only now does he feel ready to head west to Rome and beyond (15:28).

The fact that he was not the founder of the church in Rome and that he had never lived or worked among the Christians there influences the way Paul writes. In letters written to communities which he himself founded, we find him clarifying teaching which he had already given to the recipients of the letters. We find him answering questions put to him, and correcting, exhorting and encouraging them in their faith. His letter to the Romans is quite different. He is writing to them and hoping to visit them ‘that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith’(1:12). He is writing to a community whom he addresses as ‘God’s beloved’(1:7), whose ‘faith is proclaimed throughout the world’(1:8), who are ‘full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another’(15:14), whose company he hopes to enjoy (15:24,32) and whose prayers he requests (15:30). However, he still writes as an ‘apostle to the Gentiles’(11:13), and as one who is conscious of the authority that has been vested in him by God (1:1). He writes ‘so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you’(1:11), and ‘to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome’(1:15). He is aware that he is writing ‘rather boldly’(15:15).

We will find that most of the ideas in this letter are already familiar to us from Paul’s previous correspondence. In the earlier letters, however, Paul’s central insights emerge as he deals with various issues that are of particular importance to the community to which he is writing. Whatever information has reached him from Prisca, Aquila and others, Paul focuses in this letter on one issue that is of primary importance. It is this concentrated focus that gives this letter its particular power and its special place in Pauline literature.

The issue is not new. It is the universality of God’s plan of salvation and the critical importance of Jews and Gentiles living in communion in the love of Christ, respectful of each other and accepting each other with all their differences. This issue concerned Paul especially in his letter to the Galatians. The problem there was that certain Christian missionaries were insisting that to be genuine disciples of Jesus Gentiles had to become Jews and follow the injunctions of the Jewish Torah. Paul had to insist that God is the God of Gentiles as well as Jews and that people do not have to change their culture to become Christians. Faith in Jesus would require change in people’s attitudes and lifestyle, but they could come to Jesus as they are. This was one of Paul’s central convictions and it admitted of no compromise.

Paul is constantly trying to bridge the cultural and historical gap between Jews and Gentiles. He sees the success of his mission as depending upon it. He is passionately committed to unity in the Christian community, a unity that flows from the heart of the risen Christ through the presence and power of the unifying Spirit. As he writes his letter he is preparing to go to Jerusalem with a collection which he has been organising among the Gentile communities for their needy Jewish brothers and sisters in Judea. He sees this as a practical way of building a communion of love in which barriers between Jew and Gentile are broken down, and they learn to love each other as equal before God with their differences. It is the same issue that concerns Paul in this letter. However, as will become clear when we begin our study, the situation in Rome is quite different from that which confronted Paul in Galatia. The problem in Rome seems to be coming from the side of the Gentile Christians who are in the majority and who are failing to respect sufficiently their Jewish brothers and sisters. The fear of a complete break between Gentile and Jewish Christians continues to haunt Paul. It would have broken his heart had he been able to see what happened subsequently to Jewish Christianity and the wedge that came between a dominantly Gentile Christianity and Judaism. It was unthinkable for Paul to have Christians almost assuming, as most today do, that Christianity and Judaism are different religions.

Free from the need to respond to questions or to clarify earlier teaching, Paul is able to present a sustained argument concerning the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the design of God. It is this divine design that has been revealed to Paul and that he has been chosen as an apostle to proclaim. Both Jews and Gentiles need the grace that God is offering through Jesus. Without it both remain locked in a cycle of sin from which there is no escape. It is particularly to the Gentiles in the community that Paul addresses his words, for he wants them to realise what they owe to Judaism. Any failure to respect Judaism, any failure to recognise God's fidelity to his choice of Israel, any behaviour that would cause Jews to reject Christianity as alien, would work only to hinder God's plan of salvation, and to hurt the communion in love for which Christ gave his life.

Paul knew that certain Jews had rejected Jesus. He was constantly suffering a similar rejection and he is clearly anxious about his forthcoming visit to Jerusalem (15:30-32). People will reject Christianity for their own reasons. Here he is concerned only that the reason for the rejection is not the behaviour of Christians. It is their responsibility to show to all the love of the heart of Jesus, and, in the situation prevailing in the church in Rome, this is a lesson that needs to be remembered especially by the Gentiles who must continue to respect and support their Jewish brothers and sisters. In no other letter are we as conscious as we are here of listening to the words of a Christian Jew who is grateful for his Jewish heritage and grateful also that, through Jesus, he has come to see how God wills the revelation given to Abraham and to Moses to reach out to the whole world and so bring about the fulfilment of God's promises.

Paul is also writing to Jews, and we should not assume that Paul is expecting to be read only by Jews who are Christians. In fact in much of what he writes, he is reaching out to Jews to help them embrace Christ as the one through whom God is bringing the Torah to its intended goal.

Changes in our understanding of Judaism at the time of Paul have caused scholars to revise long-standing and mistaken assumptions which have biased our reading of this most important letter. Firstly, we must remember that what he has to say about Judaism and its relationship with Christianity is said 'by way of reminder'(15:15). He does not presume to be telling Jews something which they do not already know. Rather, he builds a careful argument on premises which he assumes that his readers accept. He has abundant backing from the prophets in naming the sins of Jews who are unfaithful to the covenant, including those who rely on their own good works rather than grace to find salvation. He is not accusing Judaism of this fault. Rather, he looks at Judaism at its best, shows how many Jews have failed to live it, and presents God's action in Jesus as being consistent with what God has offered in Judaism. In and through Jesus, God has fulfilled his promises and the hopes of Israel in ways that go beyond Judaism's most cherished dreams.

Nor is Paul setting out to teach the Romans a new lesson on 'justification through faith'. He assumes this as something known to Jews and Christians alike, and uses it as a basis for drawing conclusions concerning both the failure of those who reject Jesus, and the obligation of those who accept Jesus to live in mutual love. He wants to show that Judaism at its best points towards and finds fulfilment in Christianity. Jews who were attracted to Christ faced a major problem: how could they follow Jesus while remaining faithful to God whose will is expressed in the law (the Torah)? Paul wants to demonstrate that there is a power, a presence, a love and a Spirit offered to them in Jesus which enables them, in true fidelity to the law, to go beyond its limits and to reach its goal. His focus is on the love of God, the love seen in Jesus, the love that is God's gift experienced in the Christian community, the love which draws Jew and Gentile together. He wants to show that this love is the fulfilling of the law, and that a faithful Jew can be fully obedient to God by belonging to the Christian community, and by looking to Jesus to learn from him what it means to love with the love of God who loves all people without distinction of race.

To read Romans, therefore, we must be prepared to have exposed any vestiges of racism or superiority than infect our thinking or our behaviour. Paul will challenge us to open our hearts to the all-embracing love that is God and that we see revealed in the heart of Jesus on the cross. It is this love, and this love alone, that characterises what is essential to Christianity. Anything less will betray it. Hence our need for prayer, for only the Spirit of the risen Christ can enable God's will to be effective in our personal and communal lives. It is to this mission that Paul is committed and it is from this conviction that he writes.

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The earliest complete text is found in two parchment codexes of the fourth century, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus; also in a parchment codex of the fifth century, Codex Alexandrinus. We also have most of the text in a papyrus manuscript from c.200AD(P<sup>46</sup>). Though 1:1 - 5:16 are missing from this manuscript, due to the loss of the first seven pages, some verses of this early part of the letter have been preserved from two other third century papyri (P<sup>40</sup> and P 0220).

## Structure

### The Structure of Romans

Introduction	1:1-17
Part One	1:18 – 4:25
The gospel reveals the righteousness of God, who, faithful to himself and to his promises, gave us his Son, Jesus, to heal us from sin and to set us in a right relationship of love-communion with him.	
a: It is God's will that everyone be liberated from sin and its consequences. Everyone, including the Jew who has the law, needs this liberation	1:18 - 3:20
b: God's will, in fulfilment of his promise, is to bring all into communion with him through sharing in the faith of Jesus	3:21 - 4:25
Part Two	5:1 – 8:39
Through love, God shares with us his Spirit, and this shared life is an assurance of salvation.	
a: a life of being reconciled to God by sharing Christ's life	5:1-21
b: a life of being sanctified and so liberated from being dominated by sin	6:1-23
c: a new life under a new master: Christ and not sin	7:1-25
d: a life characterized by the indwelling of God's Spirit: the Spirit of the risen Christ	8:1-39
Part Three	9:1 – 11:36
God offers justification and salvation to everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who welcomes God's gift in faith. Not only does this not contradict the promises made to Israel and found in the sacred scriptures. It is their magnificent fulfilment.	
Part Four	12:1 - 15:13
Paul describes the righteousness that characterises the lives of those who welcome God's gift in faith	
Conclusion	15:14 - 16:27

**The liturgical readings**

1:1-7	4th Sunday of Advent Year A and 28th Monday Ord. Year I
1:8-15, 26-32	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
1:16-25	28th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:1-11	28th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:12-29	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:1-20,31	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:21-25,28	9th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
3:21-30	28th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:1-8	28th Friday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:9-12,14-15	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:13,16-18	28th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:18-25	10th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
4:20-25	29th Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
5:1-5	Trinity Sunday Year C
5:1-2,5-8	3rd Sunday of Lent Year A
5:5-11	Feast of the Sacred Heart Year C
5:6-11	11th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
5:12-19	1st Sunday of Lent Year A
5:12-15	12th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
5:12,15,17-21	29th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
6:1-2	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
6:3-11	Easter Vigil
6:3-4,8-11	13th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
6:12-18	29th Wednesday Year I
6:19-23	29th Thursday of ordinary Time Year I
7:1-17	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
7:18-25	29th Friday of Ordinary Time Year I

## Lectionary Readings

8:1-11	29th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:8-17	Pentecost Sunday Year C
8:8-11	5th Sunday of Lent Year A
8:9,11-13	14th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
8:12-17	30th Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:14-17	Trinity Sunday Year B
8:18-23	15th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
8:18-25	30th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:22-27	Pentecost Vigil
8:26-27	16th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
8:26-30	30th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:28-30	17th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
8:31-34	2nd Sunday of Lent Year B
8:31-39	30th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:35,37-39	18th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
9:1-5	19th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 30th Friday Year I
9:6-33	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
10:1-7,14-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
10:8-13	1st Sunday of Lent Year C
11:1-2,11-12,25-29	30th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
11:3-10	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
11:13-15,29-32	20th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
11:16-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
11:29-36	31st Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
11:33-36	21st Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
12:1-2	22nd Sunday of ordinary Time Year A
12:3-4	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
12:5-16	31st Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
12:17-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

	13:1-7	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
13:8-10		23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 31st Wed. Year I
13:11-14		1st Sunday of Advent Year A
	14:1-6	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
14:7-9		24th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
14:7-12		31st Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
	14:13-23	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	15:1-3,10-13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
15:4-9		2nd Sunday of Advent Year A
	15:14-21	31st Friday of Ordinary Time Year I
	15:22-33	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	16:1-2	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	16:3-9,16,22-27	31st Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
	16:10-15,17-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
16:25-27		4th Sunday of Advent Year B

**<sup>1</sup>Paul, a slave  
[NRSV 'servant']  
of Christ Jesus  
[NRSV 'Jesus  
Christ']  
called to be an  
apostle**

This and the following six verses make up one single sentence in Greek. It is the longest and most elaborate address and greeting of any of Paul's letters. He is introducing himself to a community with whom he has had no direct contact, and, as is his custom, he formulates the address in such a way as to indicate the main themes of the ensuing letter: the grace of God; the role of Christ in God's plan of salvation and his relationship with Judaism as expressed in the sacred scriptures; the apostolic mission of proclaiming the gospel; and the necessity of faith, with special accent on 'the obedience of faith' required of Gentiles.

As in all his letters, Paul introduces himself by his Roman name (which he shares with Sergius Paulus, Acts 13:7), rather than his personal Jewish name, Saul (see page 11). He describes himself first of all as a 'slave of Christ Jesus' (see Galatians 1:10). In a city where it is estimated there were three slaves to every free person, the image conveyed a clear message: Paul's whole life is given over to doing the will of Christ, his Lord. As he writes to the Philippians: 'Christ Jesus has made me his own' (Philippians 3:12). However, there is even more to Paul's claim than this. In the Jewish scriptures, Abraham is called the servant (Greek: *doulos* - 'slave') of the Lord (Psalm 105:42), as is Moses (2Kings 18:12), Joshua (Judges 2:8), and David (2Samuel 7:5). Paul is claiming to belong to this line. In view of the way in which Paul has described his ministry in his letters to the Corinthians, and the way in which through weakness and suffering the power of Christ is able to be made manifest through his ministry, we can also see a reference to the suffering servant of the Lord described in the poetry of the anonymous prophet of the exile (on this, see the reflection on 1Thessalonians 1:10).

His introduction is a humble one, but since he intends to share with them the gospel which he proclaims on the authority of the risen Jesus (on 'Christ' see the reflection on Galatians 1:1), he immediately claims the title of 'apostle' (see 11:13). We have also seen this in the opening address of his letter to the Galatians and in both his letters to the Corinthians. He writes as one who has been sent (Greek: *apostellō*) and commissioned for a specific task, not because this is something which he has chosen for himself, but because he has been 'called'. As always in Paul this use of what is called the 'theological passive' always implies 'called by God'.

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.

– Galatians 1:15-16

Just as Israel was 'set apart' for a special covenant relationship with God (Leviticus 20:26), and just as, within Israel, Levi was 'set apart' for the ministry of priestly service (Numbers 8:1), so Paul has been 'set apart' for 'the gospel of God' (also 15:16). The Romans were used to having the hubbub of public places interrupted by a blast of trumpets and the heralding of the 'good news' ('gospel') of the approach of the emperor's entourage or of a visiting dignitary. More importantly, Isaiah speaks of announcing the fulfilment of God's promises as 'proclaiming the good news' (see Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1). The whole of this letter will be devoted to an exposition of the good news which Jesus' disciples have come to believe and which it is their privilege to announce to the world. The word 'gospel' keeps recurring in these introductory verses (1:1,9,15,16).

Paul begins his description of the gospel by stating that it is 'of God'. This simple Greek genitive construction sets up a general relationship between the gospel and God, without defining it more closely. One can think immediately of at least two ways in which the gospel is 'of God': it is *from* God; it is also *about* God. The letter will develop both aspects. Secondly, Paul relates the gospel to the proclamations already heralded in the Jewish scriptures. This is one of this letter's central themes.

Notice that Paul begins by focusing on the special intimate communion that is expressed in the words 'his Son'. A particular range of scriptural promises is evoked by identifying Jesus as 'descended from David'. This is when we look at Jesus 'according to the flesh', that is to say, in the human nature that he shares with us, with all the weakness and vulnerability that is expressed by Isaiah when he writes: 'All flesh is grass ... the grass withers' (Isaiah 40:6-7). When he was raised from the dead he was established in power by God. 'The spirit of holiness' is the Spirit of the all-holy God, the Spirit who is the communion of love that flows between Jesus and the Father, the Spirit who is experienced as the source of life within the Christian community, binding Christians to Christ and so to each other.

Paul's gospel is that Jesus, in offering himself in love through his suffering and death, fulfils the hopes and dreams invested in the anointed one (the 'Christ', the 'Messiah') whom God promised to send to liberate his people. In the weakness of the flesh Jesus underwent crucifixion, but by the power of the Spirit (see Galatians 3:1-5; 4:6), he conquered death and is now the one through whom our spirit, too, is made holy through sharing in the intimacy of his communion.

<sup>1b</sup>set apart for  
the gospel of  
God <sup>2</sup>which he  
promised [or  
'proclaimed']  
beforehand  
through his  
prophets in the  
holy scriptures  
<sup>3</sup>the gospel  
concerning his  
Son, who was  
descended from  
David according  
to the flesh,  
<sup>4</sup>and was de-  
clared (or 'con-  
stituted')  
to be Son of  
God with power  
according to the  
spirit of holiness  
by resurrection  
from the dead

[verse four repeated from previous page]

**<sup>4</sup>and was declared (or 'constituted') to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup>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**

The life of intimate communion with God enjoyed by the risen Jesus has its source in the Father (see the reflection on Galatians 1:1 and 1:16). Raised from the dead, Jesus has been constituted by God as his Son-in-power, exercising in his glorious risen person all God's 'power' to save. Though Jesus was always God's Son, in his dying on the cross it was his 'flesh' that was obvious. Now that he is raised from death he is God's Son 'with power'. He is not only our 'Christ', he is also our 'Lord', for it is in and through him that the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the redeeming God (Yhwh, the Lord) is exercising his power to save (on the meaning of 'Lord' see the reflection on Galatians 1:3).

Paul speaks of 'grace' and 'apostleship'; 'grace' first, for his ministry flows out of his communion with God. His commission ('apostleship') from the risen Christ is to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (see Galatians 2:8). This is not meant to exclude Jews. When Luke describes Paul's initial call on the road to Damascus, he has Jesus command Ananias to go to Paul: 'for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings *and before the people of Israel*' (Acts 9:15). There is plenty of evidence in Paul's letters, to support the claim which he made in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews' (1Corinthians 9:20). In that same letter he expressed his conviction that it was God's will that 'all will be made alive in Christ' (1Corinthians 15:22), 'so that God may be all in all' (1Corinthians 15:28). The universal dimension of God's offer of salvation is a theme that permeates this present letter.

It is important not to miss the special focus to this letter provided by Paul when he describes his commission as to 'bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles' (see also 16:26). The constant repetition of the word 'faith' in these introductory verses (1:5,8,12,16,17) is an indication of the importance which this theme will have in this letter. When we reflected on the nature of faith in commenting on Galatians 2:16, we noted that obedience is an essential dimension of believing. Why Paul insists on this aspect of faith here at the beginning of his letter will emerge as we read on. Paul knows the importance of our listening to what God reveals about himself and about how he wills to relate to us. He knows, too, the importance of our opening our lives to receive God's gift in Christ and of our allowing the gift of the Spirit of the risen Lord to transform our lives. He is 'a slave of Jesus Christ' and his mission is to take 'every thought captive to obey Christ' (2Corinthians 10:5). He is speaking, of course, as one captivated by love.

Paul's commission to the Gentiles includes the community of Rome - an indication that at least a significant part, if not the major part, of the community are Gentiles. In a simple and profound statement, Paul summarises the essence of the Christian life. They are called by God 'to belong to Jesus Christ'. He wrote in similar words to the Corinthians: 'you were called by God into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord'. Belonging to Jesus Christ means sharing with him in the same intimate communion of love with God, breathing the same Spirit, caught up in the same glory. They are 'God's beloved', 'called to be saints' (see the reflection on 1 Corinthians 6:1).

He greets them in his accustomed way, wishing them 'grace and peace' (see the commentary on Galatians 1:3). 'Grace' echoes the customary Greek greeting, tracing joy to its source in the gracious love of God. 'Peace' picks up the customary Jewish greeting. There is also an echo here of the priestly blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be *gracious* to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you *peace*.

– Numbers 6:24-26

The grace and peace which he prays that they will receive have their source in 'God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ' (for a reflection on God as Father, see the commentary on Galatians 1:1). Following customary etiquette, Paul follows his address and greeting with an expression of gratitude, a gratitude offered to the one whom Paul speaks of intimately as 'my God'. In proclaiming the gospel of God's Son, Paul is 'serving' God (Greek: *latreuō*, 'worship'). He assures them that they are in his prayers and that he has often intended to come to them (see the Introduction). He prays that through their meeting, they and he may be enriched by the Spirit, for he has gained much from those of the Greco-Roman culture and from those outside it as well, the educated and non-educated alike. He is eager to meet with his brothers and sisters in the faith, if it is God's will, for mutual encouragement and to exercise among them the commission given him by Christ.

**<sup>6</sup>including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;**

**<sup>7</sup>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.**

**<sup>8</sup>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. <sup>9</sup>For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, <sup>10</sup>asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.**

**<sup>11</sup>For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – <sup>12</sup>or rather, so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.**

**<sup>13</sup>I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup>I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians both to the wise and to the foolish <sup>15</sup>– hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.**

**<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel:**

**it is the power of God for salvation to everyone believing [NRSV 'who has faith'],**

**to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

**<sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith;**

**as it is written,**

**'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'**

(Habakkuk 2:4)

There are those who are 'ashamed of the gospel'. They are afraid of losing face by proclaiming 'Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles' (1Corinthians 1:23). Not so Paul. Jesus' faithfulness to love, especially at the time of his own terrible agony, may appear foolish to the 'wise' of this world, but Paul sees in it the revelation of God's faithful love for the world. God raised Jesus to life, thus demonstrating in a most powerful way that Jesus' faith in God was not in vain. God is as Jesus revealed God to be. Now, through the risen Jesus, God is reaching out 'with power' (1:4) to the whole world 'for salvation' (see 2Corinthians 1:6). The gospel given to Paul to proclaim is that this eternal communion with God in love is offered to everyone who welcomes it. This welcoming of God's offer of love is what Paul means by 'faith'. (For a reflection on the nature of faith, see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.) The expression 'who has faith' translates a participle in Greek. It is not about what one has; it is about what one is doing. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe' (1Corinthians 1:21), who 'hold firmly' to the gospel (1Corinthians 15:2), welcome love with love and allow the Spirit of love to bear fruit in their lives (see Galatians 5:6).

That the Jews have a special providential role in the history of salvation is highlighted by Paul when he writes: 'to the Jew first'. Besides the fact that this expresses a profound conviction of Paul's and one which is central to this letter, Paul may also be taking care to counter rumours from his opponents to the effect that he denigrates Judaism. That salvation is not restricted to the Jews is clear when he adds: 'and also to the Greek'. The gospel reveals God's power in drawing everyone to the goal of eternal life for which all are destined.

In the gospel is revealed the 'righteousness (Greek: *dikaïosunē*) of God'. We first met this word in Galatians 2:21, where it was translated 'justification'. We refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 2:15-16, where we examined the verb *dikaioō*, meaning 'to justify', or 'to make and declare righteous'. Here in Romans Paul uses a genitive construction which allows for a number of ways in which righteousness and God can be related. Paul is declaring that the gospel is about God who is righteous: that is to say, it tells us who God really is and also the way in which God has chosen to be faithful to his promises of drawing people into communion through Jesus who is our 'righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1Corinthians 1:30). The gospel is also about the righteousness which we are given as a gift when we are received into this communion. It is in this second sense that Paul used the word in Galatians 2:21 (see also 2Corinthians 5:21). In both senses, Paul can call his ministry a 'ministry of justification/righteousness' (2Corinthians 3:9).

We find the ideas of the ‘righteousness of God’ and ‘salvation’ together also in the following texts:

The Lord has made known his victory (Greek: *sōtēria* - salvation);  
he has revealed his vindication (Greek: *dikaioσunē* - righteousness)  
in the sight of the nations.

– Psalm 98:2

I bring near my deliverance (Greek: *dikaioσunē* - righteousness), it is not far off,  
and my *salvation* will not tarry; I will put *salvation* in Zion, for Israel my glory.

– Isaiah 46:13

The salvation for which we long is salvation from all that threatens human life and well-being. Ultimately, therefore, it is salvation from sin and from the death that is separation from God, the only source of life. This salvation can come only from God. The gospel is that God is offering salvation to everyone by inviting all to live in communion with the risen Jesus. Since salvation is offered by a God of love and cannot be imposed, our response is essential. The welcoming of God’s love is what Paul means by faith; hence he states that this righteousness ‘is being revealed through faith for faith.’ One interpretation of this phrase is that Paul is saying, firstly, that it is *through* the faith of Jesus that God’s righteousness and the way in which we are called to be in the right relationship with God are revealed. Secondly, that Paul is saying that the revelation of the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus is *for* our faith; that is to say, that Jesus’ faith bears fruit in ours. Paul will develop both these points in the body of the letter.

He concludes his introduction with a quotation from Habakkuk, a text he quoted in the letter to the Galatians 3:11. The setting is the triumph of Babylon. It seems to the people of Judah that all is lost. The prophet encourages them to remain faithful to God and they will live. The Hebrew text reads: ‘the righteous live by *his* faith (the faithfulness of God? the fidelity to the covenant of the righteous person?)’. The Septuagint reads: ‘the righteous will live by faith-of-*me* ( my faithfulness to him? his faithfulness to me?).’ Paul omits the ‘of me’, but retains the ambiguity, and uses the text to encapsulate his gospel. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, life – and he is speaking of communion with God – comes by faith; that is to say, it is a gift from the faithful God, given to us through the faithful love of Jesus, asking of us that we respond in faith.

In these two verses Paul announces the theme of his letter. He has already stated that he was called and set apart ‘for the gospel of God’(1:1), the ‘gospel concerning God’s Son’(1:3,9). Here he expresses in summary form the essence of the gospel. It reveals the righteousness of God, who, faithful to himself and to his promises, gave us his Son, Jesus, to heal us from sin and to set us in a right relationship of love-communion with him (1:18 - 4:25). Through love, God shares with us his Spirit, and this shared life is an assurance of salvation (5:1 - 8:39). Furthermore, God offers justification and salvation to everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who welcomes God’s gift in faith. Not only does this not contradict the promises made to Israel and found in the sacred scriptures. It is their magnificent fulfilment (9:1-11:36). Finally, Paul describes the righteousness that characterises the lives of those who welcome God’s gift in faith (12:1 - 15:13).

**<sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.**

The better to highlight the amazing grace of God that has come into the world in Jesus, Paul begins the body of his letter with his most extensive and most powerful description of the moral depravity of his world. He describes the condition of those ‘who by their wickedness suppress the truth.’ The truth to which Paul is referring is, before all else, the truth of who God really is, of how God relates to us, and of how we are to live in relation to God.

That Paul’s focus is not on sin itself but on the condition of the sinner in relation to God is clearly indicated by his opening words. His topic is ‘the wrath of God’. This does not refer to a change of mood in God who reacts angrily at human sin. Rather, it refers to the situation of separation from God in which we place ourselves by our sin, with the kinds of consequences which Paul will go on to describe. Saint Thomas Aquinas with his accustomed clarity states: ‘If we look at God’s loving from the aspect of a divine act, it is eternal and unchangeable. If, however, we look at the effects that are produced in us, it is at times interrupted, in the measure in which we withdraw ourselves from God’ (*Summa Theologica* 1<sup>a</sup> 2<sup>ae</sup> q. 113, a. 2). For an extensive reflection on the meaning of the expression ‘anger of God’, see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10.

Faithful to his Jewish tradition, Paul looks at human behaviour and its effects on two levels. On the level of human cause and effect Paul states that those who suppress the truth are responsible for the mess in which they find themselves. If we use the word ‘punishment’ to describe what happens in such situations, then the punishment is clearly self-inflicted. As he said to the Galatians; ‘Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow’ (Galatians 6:7).

There is, however, more to the human condition than this, and from the outset Paul is more interested in looking at matters from the higher viewpoint of our relationship with God. Depraved behaviour is also sin, and stubborn and obstinate sin cuts a person off from God, the source of light and love. The ‘punishment’ can rightly be said to be ‘of God’, not in the sense that would compare God to an earthly tyrant who demands the last say and who has the power to get back on those who refuse to obey his will. Rather, our human rejection of God has an effect on our relationship with God. It is not that God changes when we sin. From a loving and faithful Father, God does not become a vengeful and punishing tyrant. The change is not in God but in us. We are made for communion with God. When we suppress the truth and indulge in the kinds of behaviour which Paul describes here and in the following passage, we reject God’s love, and we find ourselves locked out of paradise.

Cut off from our loving Father, we feel as though we have been banished. It feels as though God must be angry with us and is punishing us by rejecting us from his love. However, it is we who have rejected love, and, as Paul will go on to declare, God has shown his faithfulness to love by giving us Jesus to persuade us to turn back to him. Furthermore, by giving us his Spirit, he makes our turning back possible.

Only by letting go our stubborn rejection of love can we experience the communion in love for which we are created and for which we long. The condition of separation from God is called ‘wrath’(‘anger’) because this best describes the feelings associated with being in a state of separation from love. It is called the wrath ‘of God’, not because it is God who is angry, but because this state of feeling rejected is in relation to the very source of our being. We are at odds, not just with nature or with our fellow human beings, but with God. This very condition is used by God to draw us to repentance: ‘You punish them, so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins’(Wisdom 11:15-16).

The Decalogue speaks first of our relationship to God and only then of our relationship with one another. It is our failure in regard to God that results in our failure to relate properly to each other. The teaching that moral disorders are the result of failure to respect the divine is common teaching in Greek and Roman as well as Jewish moral writings. Hence, Paul speaks first of ‘ungodliness’(Greek: *asebeia* - the failure to give proper respect to God), and then of ‘wickedness’(Greek: *adikia* - ‘unrighteousness’: the state of not being in the right relationship with divinely established order). We find the same priority in the Book of Wisdom: ‘The worship of idols is the beginning and cause and end of every evil’(Wisdom 14:27). Notice in the following passage how Hosea sees the cause of moral depravity as being the failure to ‘know’ God. He is speaking not about information concerning God, but an intimate knowledge that belongs to communion. It is because we lack this communion that moral order is destroyed.

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;  
 for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.  
 There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.  
 Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out;  
 bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
 Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish ...  
 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

– Hosea 4:1-3,6

**<sup>19</sup>For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.**

**<sup>20</sup>By his creating of the world [NRSV 'Ever since the creation of the world'] his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;**

**<sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they were reduced to futility [NRSV 'became futile'] in their thinking, and their hearts, lacking insight [NRSV 'their senseless minds'] were darkened.**

**<sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they were made foolish [NRSV 'became fools']**

**<sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.**

God created us for communion with him, and so is always making himself evident to us in creation. We find this same truth expressed in the Book of Wisdom:

All people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

– Wisdom 13:1-5

When Paul claims that 'they are without excuse', we must not forget that he is speaking, as he said at the beginning, of those who 'by their wickedness suppress the truth'. He is not apportioning blame or claiming to judge individual cases. He is not speaking of those who, through no fault of their own, have not seen 'the truth' and who live in what appears to be sin because they know no better. But neither is he naively excusing everyone who sins.

We must stress again that Paul is not here focusing on sin. Rather, he is focusing on the way sin affects our primary relationship to God. He does not simply state that the thinking of sinners was futile; rather 'they were reduced to futility in their thinking'.

They went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.'

– Jeremiah 2:5

Because they blocked out the light and the love of God they suffered the terrible effects of separation from the source of all wisdom. Paul does not say that their hearts were dark; he says that their hearts were 'darkened.' He does not say simply that they were fools; rather that they were 'made foolish.' We cannot suppress the truth, we cannot reject God, without suffering the necessary consequences of such suppression and rejection.

Note that the language in which Paul describes the ungodliness of idolatry in verse twenty-three is taken from the scriptures in which Jewish idolatry is condemned (see Deuteronomy 4:16-18). This should warn us against reading what Paul says here as though it were an example of Jewish criticism of Gentile behaviour. We shall soon see that he has another aim.

Sin has its consequences. Disordered behaviour leads to disorder. We cannot simply wish these consequences away or think we can behave in an unrighteous way and not suffer the consequences. If we refuse to open our eyes, we cannot expect to see. If we refuse to acknowledge the manifestation of the invisible God in the visible creation, if we refuse evident insight, our mind and heart will lose the power to perceive. If we refuse to worship the living and true God, we will end up worshipping something base in God's place.

God is the author of the right order within which alone we human beings can find the life that is proper to us. God is concerned that we live in this right relationship to him, and so find life. Therefore God cannot stand by and watch us choose to live in pretence. God has made us such that culpable failure to relate properly to him has the effect of disturbing everything that is natural and beautiful.

The Greek philosophers, as distinct from the Greek poets, tended to restrict God to the sphere of the rational and to eliminate all talk of feelings in relation to God. The Jewish tradition felt no such inhibition, for their God was passionately involved with the world. This is the reason for Paul following this tradition in speaking of the '*wrath of God*', for God is passionately opposed to injustice, and passionately concerned to win people to communion with himself.

The fact that God is involved in the disorder that we experience as a result of our sin takes this disorder out of the sphere of the meaningless and takes it into a sphere where, through divine action, it can be given meaning and purpose. To miss this point, and to understand this and the following passage as simply a description of depraved human behaviour is to miss Paul's focus. It is this focus on God, as we shall see, that provides the clue as to why Paul has chosen to present the good news by beginning in this way.

**<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,**

**<sup>25</sup>because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.**

**<sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,**

**<sup>27</sup>and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men, and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.**

**<sup>28</sup>And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.**

At mentioned earlier, much of what follows gives the impression of being a typical Jewish denunciation of Gentile immorality (compare Wisdom 14:22-31). However, it is important to note that Paul gives no indication that he is restricting his statements in any way to the Gentile world. He is describing the condition in which we humans find ourselves when, in the words of Jeremiah: ‘you have forgotten me, the Lord, and trusted in lies’(Jeremiah 13:25).

Continuing his focus on ‘the wrath of God’, Paul does not simply describe the depravity of those who are given over to sexual vices. Rather, he says: ‘God gave them up to impurity’; ‘God gave them up to degrading passions’; ‘God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.’ When we remember the language of the Book of Exodus and how God is spoken of as hardening Pharaoh’s heart, we realise that Paul’s way of expressing himself here is traditional.

On the level of cause and effect, what is happening to people is happening because of what they have chosen to do. They are ‘receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error’. As he said earlier: ‘They are without excuse’(1:20). On the higher divine level, God is the source of the human order which sin distorts, and the most disastrous effect of stubborn and obstinate sin is that it involves a rejection of God’s love. God does not stop loving, but love must be welcomed to produce its fruit. Paul is highlighting the truth that the terrible results of sin come primarily from the breakdown of our relationship with God. This is traditional teaching.

There is a heavy accent here on ‘unnatural’ homosexual behaviour because it highlights the disorder created in the human condition by suppression of the truth and failure to acknowledge God. The distinction between natural and unnatural behaviour comes from Stoic moral philosophy, as do the expressions ‘debased mind’, and ‘things that should not be done’(Greek: *kathēkonta* - a technical Stoic word). For a reflection on Paul’s teaching on homosexuality see the commentary on 1Corinthians 6:9. As explained there we have to read Paul’s statement here with great care.

Thus far Paul has been speaking of disorder in sexual behaviour. It is not without reason that he follows the general practice of moralists of his day by beginning his list of sins in this way. They recognised, as do we, that the way we express our sexuality affects the very core of our loving and so all our moral activity (see the commentary on Galatians 5:19). The list of sins which follows here is typical of the lists found in Jewish moral manuals of the day.

‘Wickedness’ (Greek: *adikia*) refers, in a general way, to behaviour that is contrary to the divinely established order, behaviour that is contrary to the ‘righteousness’ in which we are created to live (see 1:18). We recall Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: ‘All who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in *unrighteousness* (*adikia*) will be condemned’ (2Thessalonians 2:12).

‘Evil’ (Greek: *ponēria*) is another very general word, already used by Paul in his appeal to the Corinthians: ‘Let us celebrate the festival [of the Passover], not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and *evil*, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’ (1Corinthians 5:8).

‘Covetousness’ (Greek: *pleonexia*) is one of the expressions of the corrupted human heart mentioned by Jesus himself (see Mark 7:22). It speaks of a ruthless, aggressive, grasping at what we do not have, just so as to have more. It includes using other people to satisfy our lust for possession and power. It is well described in the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, *greedy* to practise every kind of impurity’ (Ephesians 4:19). Jesus warns against it: ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of *greed*; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’ (Luke 12:15).

‘Malice’ (Greek: *kakia*) was linked by Paul with ‘evil’ in the text from First Corinthians quoted above (1Corinthians 5:8). It is a general word referring to anything that is considered bad rather than good.

The kind of ‘envy’ (Greek: *phthonos*) listed here by Paul is a certain meanness whereby a person feels displeasure at another’s good. Paul has already listed it among the signs that a person is living without the Spirit of Jesus (Galatians 5:21).

This is the only time Paul speaks of ‘murder’ (Greek: *phonos*). Like covetousness, it is mentioned by Jesus himself as one of the ways in which a corrupted human heart expresses its evil desires (see Mark 7:21). ‘Strife’ (Greek: *eris*), like envy, is numbered by Paul among the kinds of behaviour that are typical of a person who is closed to the Spirit of Jesus (Galatians 5:20). It is one of the problems Paul had to confront in Corinth (see 1Corinthians 1:11, 3:3; 2Corinthians 12:20).

**29They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife,**

**deceit,  
craftiness,  
they are gossips,  
<sup>30</sup>slanderers,  
God-haters,  
insolent,  
haughty,  
boastful,  
inventive in  
finding new  
ways to do evil,  
rebellious to-  
wards parents,  
<sup>31</sup>foolish,  
faithless,  
heartless,  
ruthless.  
<sup>32</sup>They know  
God's decree,  
that those who  
practice such  
things deserve  
to die — yet  
they not only do  
them but even  
applaud others  
who practise  
them.**

‘Deceit’ (Greek: *dolos*) is mentioned also by Jesus (Mark 7:22). Paul has had to defend himself against accusations that he was acting in this way (1Thessalonians 2:3; 2Corinthians 12:16). A related vice is ‘craftiness’ (*kakoētheia*) - a word that occurs only here in the New Testament. The word ‘gossips’ (*psithuristēs*), too, occurs only here in the New Testament, as do, ‘slanderers’ (*katalalos*) and ‘God-haters’ (*theostugēs*). ‘God-haters’ are those who choose behaviour which rejects God’s will.

The ‘insolent’ (*hubristēs*) are those who act in ways that have no regard for proper order. Insolence shows itself in wanton acts of contempt for others. The ‘haughty’ (*huperēphanos*) are those who think of themselves as superior to others, such that they do not need to have any regard for other people’s opinion or welfare. To be haughty (‘proud’, ‘arrogant’) is to be the opposite of humble. A stern warning is contained in the prayer of Mary: ‘He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the *proud* in the thoughts of their hearts’ (Luke 1:51). The pretentious, arrogant and ‘boastful’ (*alazōn*) person is a type often condemned in moral writings of the day. We might listen as the unrighteous, upon realising their folly, cry:

It was we who strayed from the way of truth, and the light of righteousness did not shine on us, and the sun did not rise upon us. We took our fill of the paths of lawlessness and destruction, and we journeyed through trackless deserts, but the way of the Lord we have not known. What has our arrogance profited us? And what good has our boasted wealth brought us?

– Wisdom 5:6-8

The expression ‘inventors of evil’ occurs only here in the New Testament. ‘Rebellious towards parents’ is found in 2Timothy 3:2. Paul has already spoken of the ‘foolish’ who ‘though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their *senseless* minds were darkened’ (1:21). ‘Faithless’, in the sense of not being faithful to the covenant, is found only here in the New Testament, as is ‘ruthless’. We find the ‘heartless’ mentioned also in 1Timothy 3:3.

Paul is not passing judgment on individual sinners. He is describing the depraved behaviour that results from our rejection of God’s love and the kind of mess which we find ourselves in when we fail to recognise God and open ourselves to welcome God’s grace. It is from this ‘death’, this separation from God the only source of life, that we need to be liberated.

Paul moved to the second person singular, a literary device, used in diatribe, for engaging the direct attention of each of the people reading or listening to his letter. It is most important to understand the literary form Paul is using. He is not engaging in debate here. Rather, he is assuming his readers will agree with him. He is establishing common ground in order to draw out certain implications as regards everyone's need for the salvation that God is offering in Jesus. He is inviting his readers into deeper understanding. Just in case his description of moral corruption might leave some of his readers agreeing with him about the state of the world but thinking that it did not apply to them personally, Paul engages them in a personal examination of conscience so that they will recognise themselves somewhere in the scene he has depicted. In the unlikely event that some readers might think of themselves as sinless, Paul wants each one to take a closer and more honest look.

He has just been describing the terrible condition in which people find themselves when they suppress the truth and reject God. He now moves from the present to the future tense and concentrates on the final condition of those who are obstinate and whose hearts are unrepentant. Physical death does not alter who we are in relation to God. When we come to look back over our whole life (when we face the final judgment) we will see what our obstinacy has done to us, especially how it has closed us eternally to God's love.

God cannot be deceived, nor can God pretend that things are other than they really are. God's judgment is necessarily righteous and so 'we know that in accordance with the truth the judgment of God falls upon those who do such things.' The good news is that God remains rich in kindness, forbearance and patience (Greek: *makrothumia*). Kindness and patience are listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). As we saw in commenting on 1 Corinthians 13:4, they come together also in statements about God found in the Old Testament. God remains as God is. God's offer of love is unconditional. Our receiving of this love is conditional on the reality of our welcoming it, and this will show in a change of mind and heart and behaviour.

When we sin we experience the effects of sin precisely in order to make us realise the folly of our ways and repent, so that in the final judgment, on the 'day of wrath' (see Isaiah 13:9), we may not have to be pronounced guilty. It may appear that God has forsaken us. It may feel as though we are suffering the effects of divine anger. However, God continues to love in order that we might change. If we welcome God's love, we will find ourselves no longer trapped in the condition which we have brought upon ourselves by our sin.

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.**

**<sup>2</sup>You say, 'We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.'**

**<sup>3</sup>Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?**

**<sup>4</sup>Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience.**

## Repentance

**<sup>4b</sup>Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**

**<sup>5</sup>But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.**

This traditional teaching is stated beautifully in the scroll of Isaiah:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:7-8

Likewise Ezekiel:

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

– Ezekiel 18:31-32

Also Baruch:

I know that they will not obey me, for they are a stiff-necked people. But in the land of their exile they will come to themselves and know that I am the Lord their God. I will give them a heart that obeys and ears that hear; they will praise me in the land of their exile, and will remember my name and turn from their stubbornness and their wicked deeds.

– Baruch 2:30-33

And Sirach:

Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand, so are a few years among the days of eternity. That is why the Lord is patient with them and pours out his mercy upon them. He sees and recognises that their end is miserable; therefore he grants them forgiveness all the more. The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing. He rebukes and trains and teaches them, and turns them back, as a shepherd his flock. He has compassion on those who accept his discipline.

– Sirach 18:10-14

The only thing that can prevent God's merciful forgiveness is the hardness of an unrepentant heart. God is love. God cannot force his love upon us, but respects our freedom and awaits our welcome. The prophet Jeremiah warns:

Your own wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God.

– Jeremiah 2:19

Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart.

– Jeremiah 4:18

Paul invokes two biblical axioms. The first is that ‘God will repay according to each person’s deeds’(see Proverbs 24:12; Psalm 62:12). Those who persevere in doing good will receive ‘eternal life’: a sharing in the glory of God through a sharing in the communion with God enjoyed by the risen Jesus, and in a way that is no longer subject to the changes that can happen in this world of space and time. The effects of sin, on the other hand, are indeed terrible, for sin unleashes furiously disruptive forces. But God is the one responsible for divine order, and so the disturbance itself is not meaningless but is an expression of God’s passionate concern to lead us to repentance. God is love. God’s initiative is always and only grace. God does not change. It is we who are capable of being unfaithful. But we are also capable of change: we can repent. In the final judgment only those who fail to repent will have to face the consequences of their refusal: those who remain obstinate in sin, who harden their hearts against God’s constant call and who persist in refusing God’s mercy. A person who is determined not to live will die. This is true for a Gentile. It is true also for a Jew, with the factor added by Jesus: ‘from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded’(Luke 12:48). As Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit’(Galatians 6:8).

The second biblical axiom is that in judging God is impartial:

Take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality,

– 2Chronicles 19:7

The Lord of all will not stand in awe of anyone, or show deference to greatness; because he himself made both small and great, and he takes thought for all alike.

– Wisdom 6:7

The rabbis differed in their opinions concerning the possibility of salvation for people who were not Jews. Paul clearly agrees with those who maintained that divine impartiality applied not only to punishment but also to the possibility of salvation. It is possible for a Gentile who is ‘patient in well-doing’ to receive ‘eternal life’, ‘glory, honour and peace’. Once again Paul acknowledges the special providential role of the Jews (compare 1:16). The fact that the offer of salvation is not restricted to the Jews is an essential dimension of the revelation made in Jesus Christ and of the gospel which Paul has been commissioned to preach, as is the fact that the salvation being offered to all is the salvation that was promised to Israel.

**6For he will repay according to each one’s deeds,**

**7to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life;**

**8while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.**

**9There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,**

**10but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.**

**11For God shows no partiality.**

**<sup>12</sup>All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.**

**<sup>13</sup>For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified [*'declared righteous'*].**

**<sup>14</sup>When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are as though they have the law in themselves [NRSV 'are a law to themselves'].**

**<sup>15</sup>They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them**

**<sup>16</sup>on that day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.**

In the previous passage, Paul stated that the God of kindness, forbearance and persistent, magnanimous love will give eternal life to a Gentile who perseveres in doing good. In this present passage, he begins to draw out the implications of this as regards the law (the Jewish Torah). This is a very sensitive subject and Paul moves slowly and skilfully.

First, if we 'sin' (Greek: *hamartanō*) we will 'perish'; we will be 'separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might' (2Thessalonians 1:9). This is true for everyone, whether a Gentile, to whom God has not revealed his will in the Torah, or a Jew. Having received the gift of the law, a Jew has the special responsibility of being faithful to the covenant, which is not just a matter of hearing God's will, but of actually doing it. If they do God's will they will be declared righteous. (For an analysis of the meaning of the Greek *dikaioō*, see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.) Jews were familiar with the promise made to them by God through the prophet Jeremiah:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

– Jeremiah 31:33

There is an echo of this promise in Paul's words concerning Gentiles. Could God be doing for Gentiles what he is here promising to do for Jews? Paul is making a powerful statement about God's impartiality, and inviting Jews to look at Gentiles in a different way. Gentiles do not have the Mosaic law, but if they follow the prompting of their conscience and actually do what the law requires, it is as though they have the law within themselves (written on their hearts).

The awareness which Gentiles have of either following or not following what their conscience prompts them to do is an anticipation of the judgment of God, who knows the secrets of the human heart (see 1Corinthians 4:5) and who judges accordingly. If they do what is right they will be acceptable to God. We find the same truth expressed by Peter in the house of Cornelius: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34-35). This does not deny the value of the law, but it means that it is not the only way to have access to God's will.

‘You’ in this passage is singular throughout. Each reader is being challenged to think about and respond to what Paul is saying. For the first time, Paul specifically addresses his questions to a Jewish reader, for it is a Jew who is likely to find it hard to grasp what Paul said about the law in the previous passage. It is to be expected that one who was accustomed to thinking of the law as a gift from God that gives the Jew the responsibility of being a teacher of the world in matters concerning the divine will would find it hard to imagine how anyone could be saved without it.

All that Paul says about the commission given by God to Israel is true and a Jew has every reason to take pride, so long as it is in the Lord. We recall the words of Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 9:23-24

However, a Jew must admit that, marvellous as the gift of the law is, knowing it and teaching it is no guarantee that one will actually keep it. Paul takes his examples from the decalogue (see Exodus 20:14-15). Robbing temples may be a metaphorical way of speaking of the sin of taking to oneself what belongs to the sacred. It may also be meant to be taken quite literally. Much pilfering of temples went on during military campaigns, and Jews may well have justified to themselves accepting and profiting from such pilfered goods.

Paul concludes with a quotation from Isaiah. He finds a new level of meaning in the text, linking the blasphemy among the Gentiles to the failure of a Jew to observe the second commandment: ‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God’ (Exodus 20:7). There is a special evil about sin that is committed by one who claims to know God. When those who sin make the kinds of claims listed above, and make the claims in God’s name, their sin causes scandal in that others are tempted to associate their sinful actions with the God to whom they claim to belong.

**17But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God**

**18and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law,**

**19and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,**

**20a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -**

**21you, then, who teach others, will you not teach yourself?**

**While you preach against stealing, do you steal?**

**22You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery?**

**You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?**

**23You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law?**

**24For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’ (Isaiah 52:5).**

**<sup>25</sup>Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law your circumcision has become uncircumcision.**

**<sup>26</sup>So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?**

**<sup>27</sup>Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law.**

**<sup>28</sup>For a person is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical.**

**<sup>29</sup>Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal.**

**Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.**

Paul continues addressing a Jewish reader in the second person singular. He wants each one to realise that what has just been said concerning the law in relation both to the heart and to the Gentiles is necessarily true of the external sign of circumcision. Drawing on traditional prophetic teaching concerning circumcision of the heart, Paul reminds his readers that what matters is internal circumcision. A Jew who is circumcised externally but fails to obey the law is as though he were uncircumcised. The text from Jeremiah quoted in the commentary on the previous passage continues:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will attend to all those who are circumcised only in the foreskin: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

– Jeremiah 9:25-26

Paul goes on to make the point that a person who is not a Jew, and so does not have the external sign of physical circumcision, is as though he were circumcised in the eyes of God, if he does God's will from his heart. Their behaviour will stand as a judgment against unfaithful Jews (compare Matthew 12:41). What matters is to be a 'Jew' internally.

Paul has consistently gone to the heart of traditional Jewish teaching on the justice and impartiality of God, on the importance of obeying God's will written in the heart, and on circumcision of the heart. The conclusions he has drawn affirm the deepest dimensions of traditional Judaism, but at the same time they highlight the fact that the external law and external circumcision are not essential to a life of obedience to God. He has said, in effect, that belonging to the Jewish race gives no special privileges in regard to judgment, and is not essential for salvation.

For a reflection on the contrast which Paul makes here between spiritual and literal, between the spirit and the letter, we refer the reader to the commentary on 2Corinthians 3:6. Paul is reflecting upon God's promise:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

Once more, in order to avoid misunderstanding, Paul has recourse to diatribe, from which he borrows the technique of a series of rhetorical questions (numbered here and placed to the right). The first question and answer make it clear that, in claiming that the Jews have no special privileges as far as God's judgment is concerned, and no monopoly on salvation, Paul is not intending to deny that the Jews have their own special grace. He will have more to say about this later (see 9:3-5). Here he is content to highlight the privilege of being 'entrusted with the oracles of God'. We recall Moses' words:

What other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

– Deuteronomy 9:7-8

Also the Psalmist:

He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances.

– Psalm 147:19-20

The second question and answer make it clear that in saying that it is possible for a Jew to be unfaithful (and thereby, by implication, to miss out on the promise), Paul is not calling into question the fidelity of God. Even if 'everyone is a liar' (Psalm 116:11), God remains true in passing judgment, as Psalm 51 asserts. God's faithfulness to the covenant is a central theme of the scriptures (see Psalm 89).

However, the quotation itself could give rise to a problem, for it declares God's fidelity precisely in the context of a plea for forgiveness, and not in the context of punishment. This could lead a reader to draw the wrong conclusion that, in order to be righteous, God must forgive and cannot punish, and that 'God is unjust to inflict wrath on us'. To avoid such an erroneous conclusion, Paul expresses this misunderstanding in a third question and in reply restates the fact that God is just, even when he gives a judgment that condemns. God's justice is absolutely axiomatic.

1. <sup>1</sup>*Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*

<sup>2</sup>**Much in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.**

2. <sup>3</sup>*What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?*

<sup>4</sup>**By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, 'So that you may be acknowledged as just [NRSV 'justified'] in your words, and prevail in your judging' (Psalm 51:4).**

3. <sup>5</sup>*But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)*

<sup>6</sup>**By no means! For then how could God judge the world?**

All are under the power of sin

4. <sup>7</sup>*But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?*

<sup>8</sup>*And why not say*

**(as some people slander us by saying that we say),**

*'Let us do evil so that good may come'?*

**Their condemnation is deserved.**

5. <sup>9</sup>*What then? Are we Jews any better off?*

**No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,**

The fourth question is basically a rephrasing of the previous one. It enables Paul to make explicit an accusation that has been levelled against his teaching. If, no matter what we do, God remains faithful to his promises, and if our sinfulness helps highlight God's fidelity, then why not go ahead and sin? Paul dismisses such an accusation as slanderous and states that people who make such an accusation deserve the punishment they receive.

The fifth question is the key one in this whole section. Granted the advantages that Paul admits belong to being a Jew (3:2), is the Jew better off *as regards salvation and judgment*? Paul's answer is a resounding No! Everything he has said since 1:18 has shown that sin affects everyone, not only the Gentiles, but also the Jews, even with their law. And God must judge each person impartially according to his or her behaviour.

To demonstrate the truth of his statement that ‘both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin’, Paul quotes from ‘the oracles of God’(3:2) that have been entrusted to the Jews. Lest a Jewish reader may think of these statements as applying only to Gentiles, Paul notes: ‘we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law’. Some of the phrases from the quoted texts echo phrases used by Paul in 1:18-32. This reinforces the fact that he did not intend those verses to apply only to Gentiles.

By way of conclusion, he states: ‘no flesh will be declared righteous in God’s sight by deeds prescribed by the law’. As in Galatians 2:16 and 3:11, he is drawing on the words of scripture: ‘no one living is righteous before you’(Psalm 143:2), and adding a reference to ‘deeds prescribed by the law’.

Earlier, he wrote: ‘It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be declared righteous’(2:13). It is important to observe that there is no contradiction involved here. The statement in Romans 2:13 is contrasting those who hear the law and do not do it with those who hear the law and do it. At the last judgment, the former will be declared guilty and will suffer the consequences of their behaviour; the latter will be declared righteous and receive eternal life. It is a statement about the justice of God’s judgment; it says nothing about the basis of their being made just.

The statement here in verse twenty, however, is concerned with the grounds or basis of justification. It states what the basis is not: it is not works of the law. If, as 2:13 says, those who do the law are in fact declared righteous, it is not because the law has the power to put one in the right relationship with God. We must look for a more profound reason. The law does, however, bring ‘knowledge of sin’. Paul made the same point in his letter to the Galatians when he said that the purpose of the law was to make sin obvious by making it appear as ‘transgression’ (Galatians 3:19).

<sup>10</sup>as it is written:

**‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup>there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one’(Psalm 14:1-3).**

<sup>13</sup>**‘Their throats are open graves, they use their tongues to deceive’(Psalm 5:9).**

**‘The venom of vipers is under their lips’(Psalm 140:3).**

<sup>14</sup>**‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness’(Psalm 10:7).**

<sup>15</sup>**‘Their feet are swift to shed blood, <sup>16</sup>ruin and misery are in their paths, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known’(Isaiah 59:7-8).**

<sup>18</sup>**‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’(Psalm 36:1).**

<sup>19</sup>**Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.**

<sup>20</sup>**For ‘no human being [flesh] will be declared righteous [NRSV ‘justified’] in his sight’(Psalm 143:2) by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.**

## Summary of 1:16 - 3:20

Paul has concluded the first major section of his letter (1:18 - 3:20). On the surface one could say that he has begun with a section on sin and has appealed both to human experience (in the diatribe sections) and to the authority of scripture (in verses ten to eighteen) to establish the fact that all, Gentile and Jew, are under the dominion of sin.

At a deeper level, however, something far more significant has been established. He began by speaking not of sin as such but of the anger of God (1:18). Even the condition in which all find themselves because of their sin is a revelation of the 'righteousness of God' (3:5; 1:17), in so far as it manifests the justice of the punishment that comes to the sinner within the order willed by God, but more basically in so far as it is a revelation of God's 'kindness, forbearance and patience (magnanimous love)' leading everyone to repentance (2:4) and to enjoy eternal life (2:7). For the power of God is indeed in view of salvation (1:16) for all those who are under the dominion of sin, whether Jew or Greek (1:16).

We have seen that the law did not make people righteous. Its purpose was to make people aware of sin (3:20). Those under the law (the Jews) were still under the power of sin (3:9). Paul is now ready to show the way in which God has chosen to do what the law could not do.

In the section just completed, Paul is not saying that there is no value in being a Jew. God is faithful, and so God's promises to those who have the law stand in spite of human infidelity. One special value that the Jews have is God's revealed word (3:2), which Paul uses to demonstrate that they as well as the Gentiles are caught up in sin. Furthermore, he makes it clear that he is not saying that God is unjust to allow punishment, nor that sin is excused because it helps to highlight God's justice.

What he is arguing is that the advantages enjoyed by a Jew do not include being exempt from sin. All are caught up in sin in one way or another, and so all have need of God's merciful forgiveness. He has already said that his gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (1:16). Since the law clearly does not guarantee salvation or withdraw people from the dominion of sin, there must be another way out of being under sin's dominion.

A Jew would have argued that the way out was to repent, to cling to the law and to perform from the heart what the law required for atonement. In this way a person would open him/herself up to God's mercy and to receive the grace promised by God. Paul wants to present another way, the way which God has revealed in Christ. It is a way that goes beyond the law. Unlike the law it is offered to all, Jew and Gentile, and, unlike the law, it is effective in freeing from the dominion of sin all who welcome it in faith.

Paul has shown that all, Jew and Gentile alike, stand in need of the gospel which he described earlier as:

the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

– Romans 1:16-17

We recall here the commentary on the phrase 'through faith for faith'(1:17). 'One interpretation of this phrase is that Paul is saying, firstly, that it is *through* the faith of Jesus that God's righteousness and the way in which we are called to be in the right relationship with God are revealed; and secondly that the revelation of the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus is *for* our faith; that is to say, that Jesus' faith bears fruit in ours'. Paul seems to be making the same point here.

In the gospel is disclosed 'the righteousness of God'. Paul's primary focus is on God and on the characteristic quality of God which he calls 'righteousness'. God is righteous, in that God always acts according to God's nature. The gospel reveals that God is love, and so we can be certain that all that God does flows from love. We can be confident that God will be faithful to his promises and true to his covenant. We can trust without reserve that God will be true to the hope that has been placed in him, and true to his desire to bring about right relationships of all people to himself and to each other. God will continue to offer to all the grace to live righteously and to attain salvation.

The gospel, therefore, is also, and in a secondary sense, about the righteousness that we can have, thanks to God's gracious love. This righteousness of God, though 'attested by the law and the prophets'(see 1:2), has been fully disclosed only 'now', in the person of Jesus and in a way that transcends the law. This is 'the fullness of time' (Galatians 4:4); 'the ends of the ages have come'(1Corinthians 10:11). 'In Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'(2Corinthians 5:17).

The righteousness of God is disclosed through the fidelity with which Jesus carried out his Father's will and through the trust which Jesus placed in God, especially, in his self-giving on the cross. Jesus offers us a share in his faith and if we welcome his offer, if we share his trust and if we, through his grace, learn to be faithful in our turn and to do the will of God – in other words, if we 'believe' - we will experience the communion in love that is the life of Jesus (see Acts 10:43). This is the 'righteousness' that is God's gift to us, and our assurance that God judges us to be in the right relationship with him.

**<sup>21</sup>But now,  
apart from  
law, the right-  
eousness of  
God has been  
disclosed,  
and is at-  
tested by the  
law and the  
prophets,  
<sup>22</sup>the right-  
eousness of  
God  
through  
the faith of  
[NRSV 'faith  
in'] Jesus  
Christ  
for all who  
believe.**

All are justified by God's grace

<sup>22b</sup>**For there is no distinction;**

<sup>23</sup>**since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

<sup>24</sup>**they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,**

<sup>25</sup>**whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.**

**He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;**

<sup>26</sup>**it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Jesus.**

We have all sinned, Jew and Gentile alike. *Now* all, Jew and Gentile alike, are ransomed from the slavery of sin by God through Christ Jesus. For it is the righteous God who 'is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1Corinthians 1:30).

Paul describes our redemption as being brought about by 'a sacrifice-of-atonement (Greek: *hilastērion*) by his blood.' On the day of atonement, the high priest entered the inner sanctuary of the temple, bearing the sins of the people. There is no place for sin in the presence of the Holy One and so, when the high priest approached the mercy-seat (*hilastērion*), the sins were cast aside, to be taken by the scapegoat into the wilderness. Jesus, our brother, offered his life for all, Jew and Gentile alike, and when he was welcomed into the divine presence, we were welcomed with him, our sins forgiven by divine mercy.

Through Jesus' faith, revealed in his offering of his life (his 'blood'), God has now come to our aid and removed the threat hanging over us while we were under the dominion of sin. Jesus inspires us to accept God's forgiveness and welcome God's love and so be taken into the protective realm of God's gracious mercy. Paul stresses that Jesus' self-offering was something ultimately willed by God himself.

God's righteousness has been revealed in the past by the way God has remained faithful in spite of human sin and has been active in his kindness, forbearance and magnanimous love in drawing people to repentance, not abandoning mankind to the consequences of 'sins previously committed'. God's righteousness is fully revealed 'at the present time'. The gospel is that God is not only patient and forgiving, but is actually making people righteous, removing us from the dominion of sin and causing us to live in a proper relationship to himself. This he did through the sacrificial self-offering of Jesus. We are speaking of grace, of a gift freely offered in love. To be effective, it has to be freely welcomed in love. Only those who open their hearts to receive 'the faith of Jesus' can experience this righteousness. As Paul says, it is 'effective through faith'.

God has now revealed his righteousness in a way that encompasses Jew and non-Jew without distinction. The law pointed towards this way, but what God has done in Jesus goes beyond the law. Like the law it is a free gift. Like the law it is in view of redemption. Unlike the law it is effective because, as Paul will go on to demonstrate, it offers the power of God's life-giving Spirit to anyone willing to share the faith of Jesus.

Paul is particularly keen to help faithful Jews see that by opening themselves to God's new gift in Jesus, they are being faithful to the law, even though their new life in Christ may require that they leave behind some of its requirements. The law has come to its goal. It has done its job. He stresses 'justification by faith', not because this is a point of disagreement with Jews, but precisely because it forms a basic point of agreement. Only on this agreed basis can he encourage a faithful Jew to see that the God in whom a Jew believes has now done a new thing, and is inviting all, in the same attitude of faith, to open their hearts to share in the faith of Jesus as lived out in the Christian community.

We are not justified by faith. We are justified by God. The gospel is that God does this through Jesus and that our role in this is to believe; that is to say, to welcome God's offer in trust and to allow the grace of God's love that is poured into our hearts from the heart of Jesus to bear fruit in love.

Paul upholds the law

*<sup>27</sup>Then what becomes of  
boasting?*

**It is excluded.**

*By what law?  
By that of works?*

**No, but by the law of faith.**

**<sup>28</sup>For we hold that a person is  
justified by faith apart from  
works prescribed by the law.**

*<sup>29</sup>Or is God the God of  
Jews only? Is he not the  
God of Gentiles also?*

**Yes, of Gentiles also,**

**<sup>30</sup>since God is one; and he will  
justify the circumcised on the  
ground of faith, and the uncir-  
cumcised through that same  
faith.**

*<sup>31</sup>Do we then overthrow  
the law by this faith?*

**By no means! On the contrary,  
we uphold the law.**

Paul uses rhetorical questions to clarify that there is no place in this new revelation for human boasting of special privilege. We recall the words of Jeremiah:

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 9:24

Boasting is excluded because the justification which people experience is one that is received as gift and accepted in faith. It is not related to success in keeping a law. We have already met this teaching in Galatians:

We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

– Galatians 2:16

The fact that the offering of justification is made to all is based on the axiom of monotheism.

There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.

– 1Corinthians 8:6

There is one God. Everything that exists comes from this one God. Therefore God is God of Jew and Gentile alike, and the justification which God offers is offered to Jew and Gentile alike through Jesus – a grace to be welcomed in faith. The law is not thereby ‘overthrown’, rather it is ‘upheld’, as Paul will proceed to demonstrate.

Though Paul is addressing Jews here, he knows that Gentiles are listening in. He wants them, too, to know that the law has not been ‘overthrown’ by the gospel, but is ‘upheld’ by it.

## Introduction to Chapter Four

Chapter four is the climax of Paul's argument. He has said that our being in the right relationship with God is not the result of our obedience. It is a grace given us by God, an unmerited gift. We are simply to open our hearts to receive it in wonder and gratitude. Of course, if our faith is genuine, the grace given us by God will bear fruit in obedience. It will enable us to do God's will. Paul has already spoken about this as the 'obedience of faith'(1:5) and he will have more to say about it later. For the moment, the essential point is that obedience is the fruit of grace that is welcomed in faith; it is not the cause of our being in communion with God. Paul has just said that this teaching, far from overthrowing the law, actually upholds it (see 3:31). He now demonstrates the truth of this by going to the law – to the book of Genesis – and what it reveals about Abraham.

Paul's contemporaries tended to stress Abraham's obedience. He was told to be circumcised and he obeyed (Genesis 17). He was told – or so he thought – to sacrifice his only son Isaac, and he was willing to do so (Genesis 22). He is praised for this:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful.

– Sirach 44:19-20

Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?

– 1Maccabees 2:52

We find the same idea in the New Testament:

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

– James 2:21

Once again we must stress that Paul does not deny the importance of obedience. He does, however, insist that the obedience that is important is the 'obedience of faith'(1:5) – the obedience that is the fruit of God's justifying grace that has been received by faith. It is God's gift of righteousness that enables obedience. It is not obedience that earns or brings about righteousness.

Paul's teaching is consistent with traditional Judaism. He did not have to convince a Jew of the necessity of faith. What he did have to do was show that while there is an unbreakable link between faith and obedience, Gentiles can be both faithful and obedient apart from the Jewish law. It was understandably hard for a Jew to see how a person could obey God without obeying the law given by God. This meant in effect that faith for them was linked with justification, with obedience and with the law, thus inextricably linking justification with the law. It is this link which Paul wishes to break, and he does so now by demonstrating that the Torah itself speaks of Abraham being righteous *before* not after he faithfully obeys the will of God.

## Abraham's faith

In doing this, his intention is not to suggest that Jews should stop observing the law and so cease to be Jews. This is exactly what he does not want to see happen, just as he does not want to see Gentiles thinking they have to begin observing the law. The gospel does not overthrow the law. It upholds it (3:31). He has already stated that the gospel is something which God 'promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy scriptures' (1:2), and that God's way of revealing his righteousness in Christ is something to which 'the law and the prophets bore witness'(3:21). His thesis is that the gospel is the fulfilment, not only of the promises, but also of the law.

Here he wishes to establish the point that the 'obedience of faith'(1:5) is not to be identified with obedience to the law. In accepting Christ with the same faith which Abraham their father showed, Jews will receive a power, a presence, a love and a Spirit that will enable them to obey – something the law could not enable them to do. This faith can be shared by Gentiles, too, who can also obey and be judged to be true children of Abraham's faith. This is something upon which he insisted in his letter to the Galatians:

Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

– Galatians 3:6-9

The gospel includes the truth that love is the fulfilment of the law. Not any kind of love, but God's love, the love seen in Christ's self-offering, the love which is the gift of the Spirit and which is experienced in the Christian community in which Jew and Gentile are drawn together. It is in the mutual acceptance, respect and love that is experienced when Jews and Gentiles recognise each other as brothers and sisters that the purpose of the law is achieved, that God's will is done and that God's eternal design is revealed.

Paul wants to demonstrate clearly to a faithful Jew that he or she can be truly obedient and faithful now by belonging to the Lord, by looking to him, by learning from him the way to God who loves all people without distinction.

Many of these points are yet to be made in later sections of the letter. Here Paul wishes to establish a firm foundation. He wants to establish that justification – being brought into the right relationship with God – is a matter of faith, for them as it was for Abraham, and that the promises in which Abraham believed are wider than the law and can be experienced by those who share Abraham's faith, whether they be Jew or Gentile.

Let us now follow Paul as he develops his argument point by point.

Paul wishes to argue against an understanding of Abraham that would hold that he gained justification because of his obedience to God; in other words because of something that he did (his 'works'). After saying that if there is any boasting to be done it had better not be done in God's presence, Paul argues against linking justification with works, by quoting from Genesis 15:6 in which Abraham's justification is linked, not with works, but with faith. He quoted the same text in Galatians 3:6. Abraham was wonderfully obedient, but it was not his obedience that put him in a right relationship with God, it was his welcoming God's justifying grace in faith. His obedience witnessed to the reality of his faith.

The word 'reckoned' (4:3,8) provides a verbal link between Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2, as it is found in both texts. This was one of the ways in which Jewish scholarship of the day sought to penetrate to a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring scripture. The use of a word in one text could shed light on its use in another.

Psalm 32 makes no mention of works, but highlights the truth that our being made righteous is first and foremost a gracious gift of God's merciful initiative. Obviously, for the gift to be effective in our lives, our response is needed, but the gift is not something we earn and it does not come by way of a payment. It comes 'apart from works' (also 3:21,28).

The first step of Paul's argument is that both the example of Abraham and the words of David show that what God reckons as justification, that is to say, what God asks of us if we are to be in a right relationship with him, is that we welcome his gracious gift in faith. When God justifies us, when God 'ad-justs' us, by forgiving our sins and drawing us into divine communion, it is a blessing, issuing from God's grace. It is not something that is merited or earned.

*<sup>1</sup>What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?*

*<sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about.*

### **But not before God.**

**<sup>3</sup>For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6).**

**<sup>4</sup>Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.**

**<sup>5</sup>But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.**

**<sup>6</sup>So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:**

**<sup>7</sup>Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;**

**<sup>8</sup>blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin' (Psalm 32:1-2).**

Abraham was justified before his circumcision

*<sup>9</sup>Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised? or also on the uncircumcised?*

**We say 'faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.'**

(Genesis 15:6)

*<sup>10</sup>How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised?*

**It was not after, but before he was circumcised.**

**<sup>11</sup>He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.**

**The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them,**

**<sup>12</sup>and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.**

Paul's second step is to point out that the blessing given to Abraham, which is recorded in Genesis 15, was given to him before his circumcision, which is not recorded till Genesis 17. In Galatians 3:17, Paul speaks of the promise being given before the Mosaic law. In both letters the thrust of the argument is the same.

God judged that Abraham was in a right relationship with him, because Abraham put his faith in God and welcomed God's blessing. His obedience in being circumcised demonstrates the genuineness of his faith, and put a seal on his relationship with God, but God's justifying of him and his putting his faith in God happened while he was uncircumcised, and therefore, by definition still a Gentile.

God gifted Abraham with divine communion before he was circumcised in order to demonstrate that Abraham was to be the father of the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised, and that both were to be children of his faith.

God promised Abraham: ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’(Genesis 12:3); in other words, he and his descendants ‘would inherit the world’. God’s promise was meant for all Abraham’s descendants. To limit it to those only who obey the law is to nullify the role of faith and to make void God’s word.

To grasp what Paul means by ‘the law brings wrath’, we have to go back to the first text in which the word ‘law’ appears in this letter: ‘All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law’(2:12). Judgment, punishment and ‘wrath’ are brought to bear by a judge who is just and impartial (see 1:18 - 2:5). But this does not mean that the criterion for judgment is the same for all. The person with the law ‘knows the will of God’(2:18) in a clearer and more explicit way, and therefore gives special dishonour to God by acting against God’s explicitly revealed will (2:23-24) . The Jew has the privilege of being ‘entrusted with the oracles of God’ (3:2). Further ‘through the law comes recognition of sin’(3:20), and with this recognition, greater guilt in sinning, and so, in justice, greater punishment.

As explained in commenting on 2Corinthians 3:6, Paul is not blaming the law for the failure of people to keep it. The fault lies with people’s hardness of heart. In fact, therefore, knowing God’s will and refusing to obey it brings its own self-inflicted punishment, which, as we have seen (1:18) Paul refers to in traditional language as ‘the wrath of God’.

Paul’s statement that ‘where there is no law there is no violation’ is almost a tautology, for ‘violation’ (Greek: parabasis - ‘transgression’) is defined as ‘the breaking of law’. By definition, where there is no law one cannot break a law. The implication is that neither can one suffer the punishment attached to a law.

**<sup>13</sup>For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.**

**<sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.**

**<sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation .**

**<sup>16</sup>For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham**

**(for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup>as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations' (Genesis 17:5) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.**

**<sup>18</sup>Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be' (Genesis 15:5). <sup>19</sup>He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.**

**<sup>20</sup>No unbelief [NRSV 'distrust'] made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup>being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.**

**<sup>22</sup>Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6).**

Receiving the promise or not receiving the promise depends on whether a person shares or does not share the faith with which Abraham responded. This is because the promise is based solely on grace. It is an outpouring of the largesse of a gracious God. It is an expression of God's righteousness. All we can do is what Abraham did, welcome the grace in faith. All who do so, all the nations of the earth for whom the promise was made who welcome God's grace in faith, will experience the blessing.

God's promise, repeated here by Paul through a quotation from Genesis 17:5, was made in the face of circumstances which highlighted the impossibility of it being fulfilled if it depended on Abraham or his wife Sarah. Their age meant that conceiving was naturally impossible. From the perspective of conceiving life, they were 'dead'. All things, however, are possible to the one 'who calls into existence the things that do not exist'. God who creates out of nothing can bring life out of nothing.

Both Abraham and his wife were beyond having children. His being a father, therefore, was pure grace, and Abraham put his faith in God and in God's word. It was this response and no other that enabled him to be in the right relationship with God. Abraham believed on God's word. He hoped, where the only grounds for hope lay in God's promise. This is the faith that made it possible for him to receive God's gift and so be judged righteous.

Furthermore, as God's promise makes clear, those who were to inherit his faith and so inherit the promise, were to come from 'many nations', not just from the Jews.

Finally, Paul identifies those who are children of Abraham's faith and so inheritors of the promise. They are those Jews and Gentiles who believe in the God who raised Isaac from Abraham and Sarah who were 'as good as dead', and now has 'raised from the dead Jesus Christ our Lord', and fulfilled his promises in him.

Paul concludes with a traditional formula linking the death and resurrection of Jesus with our being forgiven and justified. The formula itself reflects the language of the fourth song of the Servant:

He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed ... we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has *handed him over for our sins*. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was *reckoned* with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors..

– Isaiah 53:4-6,11-12

It was God who gave Jesus to us, and it was Jesus who willingly gave himself in love even when his life was taken so cruelly and so unjustly from him. To receive this gift of love, we need to receive from Jesus the Spirit of communion with his Father that is its source, and this is the gift of the risen Jesus. Paul will make the same point shortly when he writes:

We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

– Romans 6:4

**<sup>23</sup>Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone**

**<sup>24</sup>but for ours also.**

**It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,**

**<sup>25</sup>who was handed over to death for our trespasses**

**and was raised for our justification.**

Reflection on Romans 1:16 - 4:25

In these early chapters, Paul has not yet described the life of those ‘who believe in him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead’ (4:24). His focus has been on what human existence is like without such faith. There is much material for reflection in this first section, whether we be a Jew or a Gentile, a Christian or a non-Christian. We are all drawn to attend to our deepest religious experiences, and to recognise the areas of futility and sin in our life. A Jew is invited to read on to discover in what way Christianity is consistent with Abraham’s faith and with the faith of every religious Jew since, and in what way it transcends the law while fulfilling it by making possible an end to the dominion of sin. A Gentile is invited to read on to discover in what way Paul sees faith in Christ as the flowering of Judaism, not as its rejection. Paul is inviting us all to read on, for he believes that God is calling us to a way of life that will give meaning to our deepest yearnings.

Paul was writing to people who were first generation Christians, who had experienced a personal conversion to faith in Christ. If it was possible for them to fall away from faith, how much more is it possible today to be baptised but to be without faith in Christ? Paul would say to us who are in this situation: ‘A person is not a real Christian who is one outwardly, nor is true baptism something external and physical. A person is a Christian who is one inwardly, and real baptism is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal’ (adapting Romans 2:28-29).

Childhood baptism is a practice whereby an adult believing community draws a child into its own consecration. It is meant to nurture faith, not to be a substitute for it. The baptism of a child highlights the truth that everything is grace, and, like life itself, unearned. Nurtured by this gift and surrounded by love, the child is drawn by the Spirit to his or her own personal commitment to Christ the Lord. If some of us are baptised, but have never experienced or have lost a personal faith, Paul is inviting us to reflect upon our lives and upon our need for the liberation offered by God and experienced in the community of those who believe.

Let us pray for ourselves, for each other and for the world which longs for communion and for love but is easily distracted, where there is much frustration, futility and infidelity, where there are many broken promises, broken hearts and broken lives. Let us pray to see what Jesus reveals about God and about ourselves, about our present possibilities and our future hope. The promise of the gospel is that God gives life to all who are ‘of the faith of Jesus’ (3:26).

## Introduction to Romans 5:1 - 8:39

Having established that ‘all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’ (3:9), and having argued that the fulfilment of the promises and the goal of the law is to be found in faith in God as revealed in Christ, Paul is now ready to present positively the message of the gospel. He has prepared his readers for this in the introduction to the letter (1:1-17) in which he continually speaks of the gospel, and he has already expressed the essence of the gospel in 3:21-26. However, there has been as yet no explicit mention of Jesus apart from a brief mention in relation to the judgment (2:16) and in the final words of chapter four. Now Paul is ready to focus full attention on the gospel, ‘the power of God for salvation’ (1:16), the life that is possible because ‘Jesus our Lord was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification’ (4:25).

## Introduction to Romans 5:1-11

The passage which we are about to read stands in sharp contrast to Romans 1:18 - 2:8. We are dealing with the same people – the ‘ungodly’ (5:6; see 1:18), the sinner who is not righteous (5:6; see 1:18,29; 2:8), the enemy of God (5:10; see 1:30), who is experiencing now, and is destined to experience later, the ‘wrath of God’ (5:9; see 1:18; 2:5,8).

In the earlier passage such people were living in a state of total disorder and futility. In the present passage, they are enjoying ‘peace with God’ (5:1), having been ‘reconciled to God’ (5:10,11), having been ‘made righteous’ (‘justified’, 5:1,9). In the earlier passage, having abandoned ‘the glory of the immortal God’ (1:23), they were living in ways that can lead only to death (1:32). In the present passage, they live in ‘grace’ (5:2) and ‘boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God’ (5:2), confident of being ‘saved’ (5:10).

To whom was Paul referring in the earlier passage? In some way, and to varying degrees, he was referring to everyone, for ‘all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’ (3:9). To whom is Paul referring in the present passage? He is referring to all, whether Jew or Greek, ‘who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord’ (4:24). The contrast between the two conditions could not be clearer and it should not be watered down.

There is no suggestion that Paul regarded Christians as being beyond committing sin. Quite the contrary: his exhortations in the letters we have studied so far, and the exhortations that are still to come in this letter, make it abundantly obvious that a Christian is quite capable of ‘falling away from grace’ (Galatians 5:4; see 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and 11:27-32). But it is clear from this passage that essential to Paul’s gospel is the fact that domination by sin has now been broken; it is now possible not to sin – something that was not possible before. Paul will have much more to say on this in the following chapters. Who has effected this marvellous change, and how? The answer to these questions is the precise content of the gospel: God himself has effected the change, and through Christ. Let us look more closely at the text.

This grace in which we stand

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore since we are justified out of (NRSV 'by') faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**

Paul opens this section with a summary statement of the thesis which he has demonstrated in the earlier part of the letter: 'In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written: The one who is righteous will live by faith'(1:17). Jesus revealed God's gracious longing to redeem us from the dominion of sin and to draw us into a right relationship with him. Since God is love, the only right relationship with God is one of communion in love. All God asks of us is that we open our heart to his gift and welcome it in faith, for, as Paul wrote earlier, we are:

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

– Romans 3:24-26

Our faith comes out of ('*ek*') Jesus' faith. It is its fruit. Paul is thinking not only of what Jesus did when he gave his life for us in love on the cross. He is thinking of the living, risen Lord who takes us with him into God's presence where we enjoy their shared life. Living in this divine communion we stand acquitted before God's tribunal. At last we can experience 'peace', as was promised through the prophet: 'the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever'(Isaiah 32:17). For a reflection on the nature of 'peace' we refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:3.

It is through Jesus that we exult in the hope of final salvation when we will enjoy God's glory, when our whole being will be caught up in the eternal radiance of God's light and love. As explained when we examined the notion of 'hope'(*elpis*) in relation to Galatians 5:5, Paul is thinking here of the future, but he also retains the meaning which *elpis* has in the Psalms and in the prophetic writings, where it is generally best translated by 'trust'. Paul's focus is not on longing, but on a present attitude of peaceful trust that, as we now share Jesus' life of communion with God, so, in the future, we will enjoy a full and eternal communion with him in the glory of God.

The faith of which Paul is speaking, and the peace and hope, are all fruits of the communion in the life of Jesus which is being continually offered to us. Jesus is now living in glory, but during his life on earth he faithfully lived in communion with God as he endured the sufferings which he experienced, sharing fully as he did in our human condition. Paul, therefore, can add that we can take heart from the afflictions which we undergo as disciples of Jesus. This is a key theme of his second letter to the Corinthians – see Paul’s statement in 2Corinthians 1:3-10, and the reflection on 2Corinthians 2:14. Paul was able to rejoice in his sufferings sustained by the assurance that he was walking the way of the cross in union with Jesus, and that he would also share Jesus’ glory.

If we love through our suffering we find ourselves growing in our capacity to endure patiently. This patient endurance demonstrates and strengthens our faith. It ‘produces character’, and when we find that we are being graced to remain faithful in the trials and afflictions that come upon us, we, like Paul, can rejoice, for ‘if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his’(6:5).

He assures us that we will not be disappointed in our hope (compare Psalm 22:5). Our present experience of communion with God is our assurance of eternal glory (see 2Corinthians 1:22). For the first time in this letter Paul uses the expression ‘God’s love’. It is a simple genitive expression in Greek and so, while Paul’s primary focus is on the love which God has for us and so on the experience of being loved unconditionally and without reserve by God, he is thinking as well of the love which God gives us to give others, and so of the experience of being moved to love others in an unconditional way. This love has been ‘poured into our hearts’. In 1:21 Paul spoke of the hearts of sinners which lack insight, being darkened, and in 1:24 he spoke of the uncontrolled passions of the heart dragging people into sin. In 2:5, he spoke of the obstinate and unrepentant heart. In 2:15 he reminded his readers of the Gentiles who can show by their behaviour that God’s will is written in their hearts; and in 2:29 he claimed that true circumcision was a matter of the heart. In biblical usage, the heart is the centre of psychic consciousness, affection and will.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love who binds the heart of Jesus to his Father in an eternal embrace, has been poured into our hearts. We have been justified by grace and if we welcome God’s gift in faith, we are already experiencing a sharing in this divine love-communion. Like the heart of Jesus, our hearts, too, are bathed in God’s love.

**<sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions (NRSV ‘sufferings’),**

**knowing that affliction (NRSV ‘suffering’) produces endurance,**

**<sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character,**

**and character produces hope**

**<sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us,**

**because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**

**6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.**

**7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.**

**8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.**

**9Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.**

This communion in love has been made possible because ‘Christ died for us’:

God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

– 1Thessalonians 5:10

This is not something which we have earned, for it was ‘while we were still sinners’ that Christ gave his life for us. It is this that demonstrates the ‘righteousness of God’. We are at the heart of the good news. If God were to cease loving us when we sinned, there would be no hope. But God is love, and Jesus has shown that sin does not stop God loving us. Jesus’ whole life demonstrates this, for he chose to be with us sinners, not because he approves of our sin, but because he knows that only the experience of being loved could give a sinner both the awareness that change was possible and the grace to repent. We are justified by love, God’s love, and God’s love in unconditionally offered. For our part we are to welcome this love by faith. If we remain obstinate in sin, we can continue to reject God’s offer. If we pull down the blinds, our souls will remain in darkness. The good news is that the sun of God’s love never stops shining upon us. If we dare to believe and so open our heart to the love that is being poured into them by the Holy Spirit, we will experience forgiveness, healing and the communion in which justification consists.

‘We have been justified by his blood’ (compare Acts 20:28). Recall Paul’s words in his correspondence with Corinth:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

– 1Corinthians 10:16

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

– 1Corinthians 11:25

The language is sacrificial. How are we to understand being ‘justified by his blood’ and being ‘saved through him from the wrath of God’? For a reflection on the notion of ‘the wrath of God’ and of ‘divine punishment’ see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10. We must reject the suggestion that we are freed because God punished Christ instead of us. Jesus was innocent. He could not be the object of the ‘punishment of God’.

We must also reject the suggestion that God pretends that we are other than we really are, and simply chooses, because of what Jesus did, not to punish us. This would involve God declaring us to be righteous in spite of the fact that we are not. Divine punishment is not an extra that God can put aside at will. It is the consequence of the disorder that sin is and that sin causes. The only way to avert the punishment is to get rid of the sin of which it is the result.

God was always leading people to repentance (See 2:4), but prior to Christ we remained under sin's domination. Now, thanks to what God has revealed in Christ, in his life-giving on the cross, 'by his blood', repentance is possible, and so is forgiveness and salvation from the effects of sin.

We sin because we do not believe in God's love. God wanted to convince us of his love. He did so in Jesus, in Jesus' living and life-giving. In spite of all the efforts to stop Jesus believing in God's love, even the threat of death, he remained faithful. Others failed to listen, failed to believe or to obey, and went ahead with his murder. Jesus made a love-offering even of his death, and the resurrection showed that he was right to do so. People acting sinfully, and therefore acting contrary to God's will, put Jesus to death. God raised him to life, proving that he was as Jesus believed him to be. God used the example of Jesus' faith to open our hearts to the desire to believe as Jesus believed. By giving us a share in Jesus' faith, through the gift of Jesus' Spirit, God made it possible for us to carry out this desire to believe.

This same Spirit sustains in us a life that is free from the domination of sin. Sin is still possible, and if we sin we must still suffer the consequences. But it is now possible to repent of sin. It is now possible not to sin, and therefore by God's grace to be righteous, and so to avoid punishment and attain salvation. On our own this is not possible, but we are not on our own: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). God manifests his righteousness in the death of Jesus, not by inflicting his anger upon him as a substitute sacrifice, but by showing, through the resurrection, that he is faithful to the trust Jesus placed in him. The life he gave to Jesus he will give to all who share Jesus' faith.

The murder of Jesus is not a manifestation of God's punishment. It is a manifestation of human sin at its worst, and therefore of human disobedience. Jesus' way of responding to this sinful act is a manifestation of his persistent love for others, and persistent faith in God. The resurrection reveals that a death, even a murder, accepted in faith and offered in love, can be 'a power for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (1:16).

How is this possible? Because the faith of Jesus inspires and makes possible a sharing in his faith by others. By believing – something we can do because Jesus shares his faith with us – we welcome God's offer of communion and are brought into a right relationship with God (5:1). What Jesus did makes our faith possible. It does not, however, substitute for it. If we reject the offer of a share in his faith, we will not be able to resist being dominated by sin, and we will not evade the punishment which is consequent upon it. Only that person is redeemed who accepts God's offer and lives accordingly.

**<sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.**

**<sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**

Our exulting now and our security as regards the future is not based on something that has happened outside ourselves. It is based on our certainty concerning who God is, and the experience of God's Spirit that we enjoy when we choose to base our lives on this conviction. Christ has freed us from sin's dominion and has made it possible for us to be 'reconciled' (see 2Corinthians 5:17-20) and to be 'saved by his life'. We are free to accept or reject this grace.

We are now in a position to grasp more fully why Paul chose to begin his exposition of the gospel by describing the 'wrath of God'. He did so in order to demonstrate that even the disorders that result from sin manifest clearly that people will not find life apart from communion with God. Furthermore the terrible effects of sin are themselves a manifestation of the 'power of God for salvation' (1:16). They are an instrument of God's passionate concern to draw everyone, Jew and Greek, to repentance. God's anger is itself part of the gospel, for it lifts what could appear to be merely a hopeless human condition into the sphere of grace, thus giving hope to all who cry out to be released from it:

and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

– Romans 5:5

The 'wrath of God' is part of the revelation of God's righteousness (1:17), manifesting God's concern and his fidelity to his promises, as well as God's will that all recognise their need for life and find it through faith in Christ.

In the verses we have just examined, Paul has touched on three aspects of how the change is effected which takes us from the degradation of sin into the intimacy of divine communion. The first is our experience of union with Christ in his dying, in his self-giving in faith and love upon the cross: 'While we still were sinners Christ died for us' (5:8). The second is our experience of his living and life-giving Spirit, now dwelling in us and empowering us to live in union with him: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (5:5). The third is our faith, based on these experiences, that Jesus is alive, in glory, having been raised to life by God. It enables us to exult in the hope of being with him in glory: 'much more, surely, having been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life' (5:10).

He will go on now to develop each of these aspects.

In verse twelve Paul states again that ‘all have sinned’(see 3:9,23). Sin means death for it is a rejection of God, the only source of life. Paul is speaking of ‘death’ not as the breakdown of our present physical existence, but as separation from God. The sinless Jesus died on the cross, but he did not experience the ‘death’ of which Paul is speaking here, for he continued to live in communion with God. Adam gave sin entrance into the world and its poison has spread through the whole human race, and so ‘death spread to all’. Paul is about to make a comparison, but he breaks off at the end of the verse, and inserts a long parenthesis. We have to wait for verse eighteen to complete the comparison.

He begins his parenthesis with an observation. The sin of Adam was a ‘transgression’ because he acted against an explicit command. So it has been for those who act against the law given through Moses. Even though after Adam and before Moses there was, strictly speaking, no ‘transgression’ (because there was no law), there was still sin, and so death (separation from God) reigned. Paul has already described this situation in 1:18-32.

He wrote to the Corinthians: ‘As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ’(1Corinthians 15:22). This is Paul’s focus here. Furthermore, he wishes to highlight the incomparable superiority of Christ, ‘the last Adam’(1Corinthians 15:45), and the wonderful effects of what Christ has done: ‘*much more* surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ overflowed beyond measure for the many’; ‘*much more* surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man Jesus Christ’. Adam let sin in and handed on an infected human nature. Everyone followed Adam’s example. Without someone to reverse the process and introduce a new life into the world, we were all on the road to the death of eternal separation from God. Jesus has done this and now everyone can be made righteous, and ‘exercise dominion in life.’

**<sup>12</sup>Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all, because all have sinned –**

**<sup>13</sup>sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned where there is no law. <sup>14</sup>Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.**

**<sup>15</sup>But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man, Jesus Christ, abounded [*overflowed beyond measure*] for the many.**

**<sup>16</sup>And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings acts of righteousness [NRSV ‘justification’].**

**<sup>17</sup>If, because of one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>18</sup>Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.**

**<sup>19</sup>For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.**

**<sup>20</sup>But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied;**

**but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,**

**<sup>21</sup>so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

It is important here to keep Paul's perspective. His focus is not primarily on Adam, sin and death. Rather, he is highlighting the wonder of what Christ has made possible. The point he is making is that the condition of justification and its goal in eternal life which are consequent upon what has been done by the new Adam, Christ, are far more astonishing than the consequences of sin.

A comparison of verse eighteen and verse nineteen makes it obvious that the word 'many' is not being used in contrast to 'all', but rather in contrast to 'one'. This is normal Semitic usage. On one side there is a single individual (Adam, Christ); on the other there is the multitude of those who are 'born' from him: from Adam, the human race; from Christ, those who share Jesus' faith and love-communion with God. No one is excluded from God's offer of the justification that consists in communion in God's life. It is 'for all'. Human nature has been infected by sin since its origins. All have sinned and so all have inherited death. If we welcome the life of the Spirit offered us from Jesus, and if we share Jesus' faith, we will inherit life: 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1Corinthians 15:22).

It was Adam's disobedience that allowed the poison of sin to infect the human race. It is Jesus' obedience that neutralises sin and all who draw their life from Jesus can share his communion with God: 'by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'. Jesus' obedience is the fruit and expression of his faith (see reflections on Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:21-26). We cannot earn righteousness. We cannot do anything to gain it. It is a free gift offered to us in love by God. To welcome it we need faith, and it is Jesus who gives us a share in his faith and so enables us to receive the righteousness that God so lovingly offers.

Between Adam and Jesus came the law. What was its role? In fact its introduction led to an increase in sin, because now sin is an action of direct disobedience against God's known will (3:20). However, in the providence of God, it also brought hidden sins out into the open, thus making it more and more obvious that we are failing and need redemption. It helped us cry out to God in our need and seek pardon. It prepared us for God's merciful response in Jesus. Paul concludes by emphasising the abundance of God's grace and the eternal life that is offered to all 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'.

The opening verse is a rhetorical question picking up a possible misunderstanding that could arise from what Paul said in 5:20: ‘Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’ (compare 3:7-8). If God loves sinners, and if the more we sin the more God’s grace abounds, then why not continue to sin? Paul could have replied by making the simple point that while it is true that sin does not stop God loving, it is also true that obstinate persistence in sin prevents us welcoming the love which God is offering. However, he takes the opportunity to take us to the heart of the Christian life in which Jesus gives us his Spirit so that we can live with him a life of communion in love with God, a life free from sin. Let us pause here to reflect on Paul’s teaching concerning baptism. We begin with the promise made by God through the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:25-27

God promises to wash us clean from sin, to sanctify us through the gift of his Spirit, and to enable us, thereby, to live a life of obedience to God’s will. Paul picks up Ezekiel’s ideas in writing to the Corinthians:

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

– 1 Corinthians 6:11

That baptism was understood as a cleansing in which past sin is washed away is expressed in the words spoken by Ananias to Paul on the occasion of Paul’s own baptism:

Get up, be baptised, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.

– Acts 22:16

The baptismal water is a symbol of the life-giving Spirit. It is the Spirit of the risen Christ who washes, sanctifies and justifies. When a person calling on Jesus opens his/her heart in faith to welcome God’s gift, the Spirit of God comes down upon that person as when Jesus himself was baptised.

<sup>1</sup>*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?*

<sup>2</sup>**By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?**

<sup>3</sup>**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?**

<sup>4</sup>**Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**

<sup>5</sup>**For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.**

<sup>6</sup>**We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might be no longer enslaved to sin.**

## Baptism into Christ

Luke describes Jesus' baptism:

When Jesus had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

– Luke 3:21-22

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

– 1Corinthians 12:13

There is more to baptism than being washed clean from sin: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(5:5). We are embraced by God's love and share the communion in love which is the life of the risen Christ. God says to each of us: 'You are my son/my daughter. You are the one I love. I delight in you.'

It is this gift of the Spirit which, in Paul's words, 'justifies' the baptised person. Just as 'our ancestors ... passed through the sea, and were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea'(1Corinthians 10:1-2), so those who pass through the waters of baptism are baptised into Christ. Redeemed from the land of slavery, we can walk free towards the Promised Land. This is Paul's focus in the passage before us. Sin should be a thing of the past, for now we can live a new life, the life of the risen Christ:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

We are graced now with this new life. We are a new creature:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.

– 2Corinthians 5:17-18

Paul speaks of the baptised person being clothed in Christ:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

– Galatians 3:27

The Spirit transforms, not only the heart, but every aspect of the human person as the one baptised into Christ is:

being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

Having been drawn by grace into communion with God through a sharing in Jesus' risen life, having welcomed this grace in faith, and having been initiated into the life of the Christian community through the sacramental action of baptism, how can we go on living in sin?

United with Christ in a love-communion with God, we have been released from slavery to sin. Going down into the baptismal waters is like going down into the grave with Jesus. He was raised up from the grave to the life of the resurrection. So it is for us who have come up out of the baptismal waters. We have been raised with Jesus to this new life. How can we go on living in sin?

When Paul speaks of Jesus' crucifixion and burial as a baptism he is echoing Jesus' own words:

I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

– Luke 12:50

In believing the good news and in accepting to be baptised into the community of Jesus' disciples, we have welcomed the embrace of the crucified and risen Jesus and the new life of the Spirit which is Jesus' own life of communion with God. For Paul this means that 'the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Galatians 6:14). It is to be the same for all the baptised:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

– Galatians 5:24

'We have been united to him in a death like his'. The image is that of being grafted onto Christ, to grow now from the life of his Spirit that has been given to us. Paul sees baptism, like the passing through the Red Sea, as the end of one kind of existence (dominated by sin) and the beginning of another (grafted into Christ):

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

– 1Corinthians 5:7-8

[repeated from two pages back]

**How can we who died to sin go on living in it?**

**<sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?**

**<sup>4</sup>Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**

**<sup>5</sup>For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.**

**<sup>6</sup>We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might be no longer enslaved to sin.**

**<sup>7</sup>For whoever has died is freed from sin.**

**<sup>8</sup>But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.**

**<sup>9</sup>We know that Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.**

**<sup>10</sup>The death he died he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.**

**<sup>11</sup>So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

**<sup>12</sup>Therefore do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.**

**<sup>13</sup>No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.**

**<sup>14</sup>For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.**

Death takes a person beyond sin's reach. The dead cannot sin any more. We have died with Christ, so let us leave the realm of sin and live with Christ the new life of communion with God. The goal of our life is to 'be with the Lord forever' (1Thessalonians 4:17). In the meantime, let us live now with him 'so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies' (2Corinthians 4:10); 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2Corinthians 5:21). In speaking of our union with Jesus, Paul is reflecting on the very heart of the gospel and the central Christian experience.

In his letter to the Galatians he speaks of 'the churches of Judea that are in Christ' (1:22; compare 1Thessalonians 2:14). He speaks of 'the freedom we have in Christ Jesus' (2:4). What binds Christians together is that 'all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:28). 'In Christ Jesus the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (5:6). In his first letter to the Thessalonians he stresses the fact that this communion in the life of Jesus does not end with physical death (1Thessalonians 4:16; see 1Corinthians 15:18-19).

Being in Christ is central also to Paul's letters to the Corinthians. In his first letter he addresses them as 'those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus' (1:2). He speaks of God as 'the source of your life in Christ Jesus' (1:30). 'In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel' (4:15). He speaks of the way he lives 'in Christ Jesus' (4:17) and concludes: 'My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus' (16:24). Similarly in his second letter: 'in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity' (2:17); 'we are speaking in Christ before God' (12:19).

A Christian can choose to return to the slavery of sin (much as the Hebrews wanted to return to Egypt). Since, however, we have been released by God from sin's dominion, Paul exhorts us to use our bodies now as weapons in the fight against evil. We are reminded of Isaiah: 'Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins' (Isaiah 11:5). Baptised in Christ, we are no longer 'under the law', but we are 'under grace', so let us be obedient to the inspiration of grace and live a life of righteousness. Let God, not sin, be our lord.

## A reflection on baptism

In baptism we are sealed with the oil of chrism: we are 'christened'. Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). We are signed with his seal. We belong body and soul to him. Every thought and every action of ours is to rise with the perfume of the anointing oil to God as a sacrifice of praise. Wherever we walk, Christ walks. Wherever we love, Christ loves. Wherever we pray, Christ prays.

In baptism we are clothed in a white garment: we are clothed with Christ to 'walk in newness of life'(6:4). 'You must consider yourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus'(6:11).

In baptism we receive a candle lit from the paschal candle: we are enlightened by Christ, in order that the light of the risen Christ might shine through us to the world.

In baptism we join the Christian community in praying 'Abba! Father!', for, united to Christ, we become children of the Father.

In the future, this means life with him beyond death: 'If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him'(6:8). In this passage, however, Paul concentrates on the possibility *now*, and so the obligation *now*, to rise to a new life. The Christian is 'no longer enslaved to sin'(see 3:9; 6:17,20). We are slaves of Christ (see 1:1). So Paul urges us to 'consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus'(6:11). Something is possible now which was not possible 'under the law' for the dominion of sin was not yet broken. Now, united to Christ, 'you are not under the law, but under grace'.

Paul is asking his readers to reflect on their experience of baptism. He is asking them to recall the new life which they experienced when they joined the community of love whose source is the Spirit of the risen Jesus. Because they could now look to Jesus, they found that they could fulfil the law as they never could before. They experienced his love and their one desire was to live his life. We cannot be open in faith to Jesus' love, we cannot be part of the community that lives by his Spirit, while persisting in sin. Baptism involves us in a process whereby we become more and more emptied of self and more and more filled with the Spirit of Jesus, till we are completely taken over by the Spirit of love that unites Jesus to his Father. The fruits of the Christian life, therefore, are no longer the fruits of the sinful self, however enlightened by the law or by conscience. They are the fruits of the Spirit of Jesus. They are the gift of God and so the fruits of holiness.

Let us pray that the innocence that was ours on that day may be renewed. 'Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies'(6:12). Let us pray to realise what a gift it is we have been given and to live in the intimate communion of love which is Jesus' own life with God and which God is offering us through him.

*<sup>15</sup>What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?*

**<sup>16</sup>By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?**

**<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, <sup>18</sup>and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.**

**<sup>19</sup>I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater rebellion [NRSV 'iniquity'], so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.**

**<sup>20</sup>When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup>So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death.**

**<sup>22</sup>But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. <sup>23</sup>For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Paul reshapes the question posed in verse one, now in the context of the freedom of the Christian who is no longer 'under the law but under grace'. In Paul's world sometimes a person would choose slavery as a means of avoiding destitution. With an apology (verse nineteen), Paul uses this as a metaphor for the Christian life. When a person chooses baptism, he/she chooses to live in obedience to a new lord, the Lord God himself. Previously they were 'slaves of sin', living a life of 'rebellion'. Separated from God, the source of life, the only outcome of such a life of slavery was 'death' (see 5:12).

They have been freed from this slavery. Surely they will not return to it! As Paul wrote to the Galatians:

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

– Galatians 5:13

They have been 'set free from sin'. Their new lord is the all-loving God. Paul introduced himself in this letter as a 'slave of Jesus Christ' (1:1). They, too, are to offer themselves, body and soul, to the service of their new Lord, making themselves 'slaves to righteousness for sanctification'. When they accepted baptism, they accepted the gospel, including the directions which they were given concerning how they were to live out their faith. They are to be 'obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which they were entrusted' (compare 1 Corinthians 11:2). The Christian is in a process of moral 'sanctification' guided by this teaching. Their goal is 'eternal life'.

This 'life' is 'eternal', for it does not have its source in the passing world. It is communion in the eternal life of God. It is 'in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Once again Paul insists that it is not something that we can earn. It is a 'free gift', a 'grace-gift' (Greek: *charisma*) from God.

Paul is speaking here especially to Jewish Christians, for it is they who formerly lived under the law. Earlier he wrote: 'whoever has died is freed from sin' (6:7). Now he says they are also free from the law. Using an illustration from marriage law, he reminds them that their dying with the crucified Christ (see 6:4-6) discharged them from having the law as their master. Their lord is now the risen Christ: they 'belong to him who has been raised from the dead'.

His argument is not about whether one should obey or not obey the law. If these were the terms of the debate, Paul's answer would correspond with that of the whole Jewish tradition. God's revealed will calls for obedience: 'it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified' (2:13). Nor is Paul arguing in favour of discarding the law as though it has no value. He has already said: 'we uphold the law' (3:31), and he will have more to say of its value presently. It is a question of which master they are under: the law or Christ.

However, concerning the law Paul has also said: 'through the law comes the knowledge of sin' (3:20), and 'the law brings wrath' (4:15), and 'law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied' (5:20). Notice, too, the parallels between this passage and chapter six. There he speaks of those who 'died to sin' (6:4); here he speaks of 'dying to the law'. There he speaks of being 'freed from sin' (6:7,18); here he speaks of being 'discharged from the law which held us captive' (see Galatians 3:23). There, as here, he speaks of 'walking in newness of life' (6:4).

The point he is making here is that 'through the body of Christ', that is, because of Jesus' self-offering in love on the cross, we have received the grace of dying with him and so have been discharged from having the law as our master. We now have a new lord: 'I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:19). Living to God means 'bearing fruit for God ... in the new life of the Spirit'. Paul will explain what he means by the law arousing sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:56). On the contrast between the written code and the life-giving Spirit see the commentary on 2 Corinthians 3:6.

**<sup>1</sup>Do you not know, brothers and sisters — for I am speaking to those who know the law — that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime?**

**<sup>2</sup>Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.**

**<sup>3</sup>Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.**

**<sup>4</sup>In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.**

**<sup>5</sup>While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.**

**<sup>6</sup>But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.**

*<sup>7</sup>What then shall we say?  
That the law is sin?*

**By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'**

**<sup>8</sup>But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment produced in me all kinds of covetousness.**

**Apart from the law, sin lies dead. <sup>9</sup>I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life [NRSV 'revived'] <sup>10</sup>and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup>For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.**

**<sup>12</sup>So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.**

*<sup>13</sup>Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?*

**By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.**

The problem is not the law, it is sin. Earlier Paul had said: 'through the law comes the knowledge of sin' (3:20). He repeats this point here, focusing now on human experience. Human beings behave badly, but it is the law that informs us of God's will, and so turns bad behaviour into flagrant rebellion against God's known will. To exemplify this, Paul takes the reader back to the garden of Eden and the first sin committed by Adam. He chooses the commandment of the law that speaks of desire (Deuteronomy 5:21), because it penetrates to the intentions of the heart and so to the deepest roots of sin. Recall Jesus' words: 'it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come' (Mark 7:21). We read in James:

One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it is sin that it bears, and when sin has reached full term, it gives birth to death.

– James 1:14-15

The law was intended for life: 'You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord' (Leviticus 18:5). However, sin, like the serpent in the garden of Eden, was lying dormant, and when the command was given it sprang to life, and used the commandment to seduce Adam into sinning. Sin and desire conspired against the law, and it did not have the power to gain victory.

The law is the revealed expression of God's will. It is, therefore, 'holy, just and good'. The trouble is not the law. It is not the law that brought about the death of separation from God. It was sin, lurking in the depths of the human heart and finding expression in desire. Sin was able to use even something as God-given as the law to further its ends. The 'I' of this passage is Everyman-without-Christ. Paul is reflecting on the human condition.

There is a hint of hope in Paul's final statement here. It is true that the commandment, since it made sinful desire a flagrant disobedience, caused sin to become 'sinful beyond measure' (see 5:20). But it is also true that what was lurking in the undergrowth has been unmasked and revealed for what it really is (see 3:20). There is hope in this, as Paul will demonstrate.

Once again Paul stresses that the problem is sin, not the law (see 3:20; 7:7). And once again the 'I' is Everyman, including the Jew who 'delights in the law of God'. It applies to every one of us in so far as we are under the dominion of sin, from which we cry out to be redeemed. It applies to every human being without Christ. The use of the 'I' invites each of Paul's readers to examine his/her own experience to test the truth of what he is saying.

In this state, before God answered our cry with the gift of Christ, it was not that our person, our 'inmost self', was evil. The 'I' wanted what was right and good, and, with the help of the law, was able to recognise it. The problem was that we were all under the dominion of sin, and so were unable to carry out our good intentions. This is the basic limitation of the law. Though the law is 'spiritual' (Greek: *pneumatikos* - belonging to the sphere of the divine Spirit), we human beings are 'of the flesh' (*sarkinos* - weak and vulnerable to corruption). Law was unable to break the domination exercised by sin over human beings.

However - 'thanks be to God' - there has been a divine response to the cry of our inmost self; and the response is Jesus Christ our Lord. In the following passages Paul will describe the difference Christ has made.

We should not miss the important distinction made by Paul between the 'inmost self' and 'sin'. Paul is not saying that the 'inmost self' is sinful. We should also note that Paul is not speaking here of his present experience as a Christian, or of the present experience of other Christians. He is describing the wretched state of mankind under sin's dominion. It is the psychological equivalent of the condition he described in 1:18 - 3:20. Those who have been made righteous by God through their sharing in the faith of Jesus are, thanks to God's grace, no longer under sin's dominion. They may sin at times, and they can turn back to a life of sin. But while they believe in him, they are 'under grace' (6:14)

**<sup>14</sup>For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.**

**<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.**

**<sup>17</sup>But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.**

**<sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.**

**<sup>21</sup>So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.**

**<sup>22</sup>For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup>but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.**

**<sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.**

**<sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**

**<sup>2</sup>For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.**

Paul has been building up to this point from the beginning of the letter. He has been writing for everyone, Jew and Gentile. In a special way, however, he has been making the way as easy as possible for a Jewish reader to welcome the gospel as the way to be truly faithful to God and to Jewish tradition. A Jew who is 'in Christ Jesus' will lose none of his/her delight in God's revealed word. *Now* (see 3:21; 7:6), he/she will find that obedience is possible, as is communion with God's Spirit and the assurance of eternal life. Such a life fulfils all that Judaism ever promised. Indeed, it goes beyond all that it ever thought possible.

What then is the gospel? It is that 'there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death'. It is no longer sin that exercises dominion. Rather, as Paul said earlier, it is 'grace through justification leading to eternal life' (5:21). Thanks to Jesus, we have been 'discharged from the law' (7:6). Now, we 'belong to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God' (7:4).

Previously, we found ourselves unable to obey the law. We knew that, before the divine tribunal, the law would stand and accuse us, and that we would face a judgment of condemnation (see 5:16,18): 'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them' (Deuteronomy 27:26 – quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:10). Now, we are no longer 'captive to the law of sin that dwells in us' (7:23), suffering the effects of our slavery to it, swept along by the unruly desires of our unspiritual self and accused by the law. Now, thanks to Jesus' life-giving Spirit (see 1Corinthians 15:45), we are living in the communion of love which he shares with the Father:

It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:20

We can now 'live by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25): the 'Spirit of life' (see 7:6), the Spirit of love that flows between the risen Christ and God. When we welcome in faith this gift of God's grace, we find ourselves with a new principle of life, and we are made able to bear fruit in love (Galatians 5:6), and to obey the law of God in which our inmost self has always delighted (7:22). We have been 'set free' (see 6:18,20,22), for 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2Corinthians 3:17) – a freedom which the law was never able to achieve.

In these and the following verses, Paul takes us to the essence of the Christian experience of being ‘in Christ Jesus’, living by his Spirit. This relationship with Christ has been at the heart of Paul’s message from the beginning of the letter. In the introduction he speaks of himself as a ‘slave of Christ Jesus’(1:1), and of Christ as ‘our Lord’(1:4). The Christians in Rome are ‘called by Jesus Christ’(1:6), and Paul wishes them grace and peace ‘from the Lord Jesus Christ’(1:7). He concludes his introductory words by offering his thanks to God ‘through Jesus Christ’(1:8).

Paul goes on to state that the final judgment will be ‘through Christ Jesus’(2:16). He speaks of Jesus through whose faith and sacrificial self-offering God’s true self was revealed. We are offered a share in the righteousness of Jesus through sharing in his faith (3:21-26). Human sinfulness put Jesus to death, but divine fidelity raised him to life in order to make us righteous (4:25). The peace that Christians experience in relation to God is a gift that comes to us through Jesus who ‘died for us while we still were sinners’(5:8). Living now in the glory of God, Jesus is the source of our hope, for ‘we will be saved by his life’(5:10). We rejoice because of him (5:11).

The way Jesus gave himself in love on the cross drew people to want to be united to him. This desire found expression in wanting to be united to those who were Jesus’ disciples. Welcome into the community was ritually enacted in the initiation of baptism. Wanting to be with him on the cross and to put to death that part of themselves that was being seduced by sin, those who were baptised accepted to go down with him into the grave, so as to rise with him to a new life here, and to eternal life hereafter (6:1-14). Now they ‘belong to him’(7:4), and God has saved them from the dominion of sin and death (7:25).

This belonging to Christ Jesus is experienced through communion with his Spirit. Paul spoke of the Holy Spirit first in the address when speaking of Jesus’ resurrection (1:4). Apart from that he has mentioned the Spirit only twice: as the one through the gift of whom God has poured love into our hearts (5:5), and as the source of our new life (7:6). It is this experience of the Spirit upon which Paul now wishes to focus. When he speaks of the Spirit, he is thinking of the dynamic influence of God and of the risen Christ in the lives of those who share the faith of Jesus. He is thinking of the many ways in which God’s love is manifested in our lives. He is thinking of the powerful source of the new life that we have in Christ. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Spirit of God is God as present and active: creating (Genesis 1:2), giving life (Genesis 2:7), renewing (Psalm 104:30), and guiding us through the words of his prophets. Paul is faithful to this tradition. Now, however, God’s presence and action has been revealed in Jesus, and so Paul is thinking of the Spirit of God’s love that binds the risen Christ to God. This is the Spirit through whom God now creates, gives life, renews and guides us. It is through the gift of the ‘Spirit of Jesus’ that God fulfils the promise which he gave through Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you ... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

– Ezekiel 36:26 and 37:14

**<sup>3</sup>For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,**

In the weakness of our humanity (the ‘flesh’), unable to throw off the yoke of sin, we found that sin was able to use the law to arouse desire, and to render the law powerless to effect the life to which it was meant to lead (compare Galatians 2:16; 3:11; Acts 13:29). As Paul wrote earlier: ‘I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members’ (7:22-23). The law could not liberate us from sin, but God could, and this was the mission which he gave to Jesus, ‘his own Son’. This was the purpose of everything that Jesus was, and everything that Jesus said or did. Paul’s focus, as always, is on Jesus’ self-giving on the cross. It was in this culminating act of love that we received ‘the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’. It is in contemplating Jesus on the cross that we see that God has ‘put him forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood’ (3:25).

God sent his own Son ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’. His ‘flesh’ was the same as ours. He was one of us, a member of this sin-oriented and sin-affected human race. He was tested as we are in every way. He had to suffer the effects of sin in every aspect of his human situation, especially in the sinful way in which he was treated by others. He was even condemned by those who claimed to be carrying out God’s law, and he suffered the curse of rejection by his fellow Jews and death by hanging on a tree. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”’ (Galatians 3:13).

His ‘flesh’ was the same as ours. However, in his case the ‘likeness’ was not exact, because though he shared the weakness of our human condition, unlike us, he did not sin. Though, ‘for our sakes God made him to be sin’ [in the sense just described], he ‘knew no sin’ (2Corinthians 5:21). Though ‘tested in every way as we are’, he remained ‘without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15). He had to face the forces unleashed by sin, but because they were unable to deflect him from his faith in God and from his love, he remained, throughout the testing, in communion with God.

He conquered sin in the flesh. His victory showed that sin is not invincible. His gift of the Spirit enables those who welcome the Spirit in faith, to be freed from sin (‘justified’) and to live in communion with God. In him we are enabled to resist the desires of the flesh, and to share in his victory over sin. We are enabled to remain in divine communion in this world, and so to be declared righteous at God’s tribunal and to inherit the glory of God in which final salvation consists.

Through his loving obedience to God in the actual circumstances of his life, Jesus fulfilled ‘the just requirements of the law’. This is what Paul means by ‘the obedience of faith’(1:5). Through his loving gift of himself to us, Jesus enabled us also, in communion with him and through the power of his Spirit, to fulfil these just requirements, and to live a life of obedience to God. This is provided we do not let our decisions be determined by the flesh. Grace has always to be welcomed. Faith is not a once for all decision. Under the impulse of the Spirit it must be renewed daily so that we ‘walk according to the Spirit’.

There are two ways in which we can choose to live. One way is to live for the self – not the ‘inmost self’ that delights in the law and responds to the Spirit – but the self that is directed and dominated by our self-focused desires. The other way is to live by the Spirit. Paul developed these contrasting ways in his letter to the Galatians in which he pleaded with them to ‘live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh’(Galatians 5:16). He went on to list some of the ‘deeds of the flesh’, and by way of contrast some of the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:19-23). He concluded:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

– Galatians 5:24-25

If we follow the desires that do not come from the Spirit, there is only one outcome: the death of separation from God: ‘The end of those things is death’(6:21). If we follow the desires that well up from our ‘inmost self’ in response to the Spirit, we will experience life: ‘the end is eternal life’(6:22).

To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.

– Romans 2:7

Just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace exercises dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Romans 5:21

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

– Galatians 6:8

Communion with God brings ‘peace’: ‘Justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1).

**<sup>4</sup>so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us,**

**who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

**<sup>5</sup>For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.**

**<sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.**

**<sup>7</sup>For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup>and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**

**<sup>9</sup>But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.**

Paul speaks again of the inability of a person whose mind is set on the desires of the flesh to submit to God's law or to please God. He does so in order to highlight the contrast. 'You', he says to the Christians of Rome, 'you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit'. As verse nine makes abundantly clear, Paul is speaking about 'the Spirit of God', which is 'the Spirit of Christ'. He is speaking about the Spirit of love that is the communion between Christ and God. We are *in* the Spirit, for we are caught up *in* the communion of love that is the life of the risen Christ. We are in the Spirit and the Spirit is in us. As he wrote earlier: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). In drinking in God's love 'we were all made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12:13). 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' (Galatians 4:6).

It is this truth that led Paul, in his correspondence with the community in Corinth, to remind them that they are God's temple:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

– 1 Corinthians 3:16

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

– 1 Corinthians 6:19

We are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'.

– 2 Corinthians 6:16

Because the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, through the gift of the Spirit we 'belong to Christ' – an expression frequently used by Paul to describe what it means to be a Christian (see Galatians 3:29 and 5:24; 1 Corinthians 3:23 and 15:23; 2 Corinthians 10:7). Through the gift of the Spirit, we are drawn into the loving of the triune God in whom we live and who has made his home in the depths of our 'inmost self'.

Because the Spirit dwells in us, Paul can say that ‘Christ is in you’. This is at the heart of Paul’s own Christian experience:

It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.  
And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son  
of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.  
– Galatians 2:20

Paul offers this as the test of a Christian life:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the  
faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ  
is in you?

– 2Corinthians 13:5

Jesus is breathing into our being the breath of God’s love. ‘The Spirit is [our] life because of righteousness’. God’s giving us this Spirit is what we mean by ‘justification’(5:18), and the ensuing communion in love is what we mean by ‘righteousness’(5:21). Without this communion our mortal bodies, because of sin, would die; that is, we would be separated from God, the only source of life. Because of the indwelling Spirit, we live, and because it is this Spirit which ‘raised Jesus from the dead’(see 1:4; 4:24; 6:4), and because the risen Christ ‘became a life-giving Spirit’(1Corinthians 15:45), we are assured that not even physical ‘death’ will be able to separate us from Christ. We will ‘reap eternal life from the Spirit’(Galatians 6:8). ‘Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died’(1Thessalonians 4:14). ‘God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power’(1Corinthians 6:14). ‘We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence’(2Corinthians 4:14).

The person whose cry is heard in Romans 7 was caught ‘in the flesh’, unable to submit to God’s law, ‘unable to please God’. Now another life is possible *if* we accept it. Notice the recurring ‘if’ through verses nine to eleven. Tragically, it is possible for us to turn away from the extraordinary grace of communion which we have received. It is possible to turn again to the distracting and corrupting enticements of our sin-prone nature. If we do this, and choose against the Spirit, we are bound to die. There is no other possible outcome. We must be ‘crucified with Christ’(Galatians 2:19). When the Spirit of Jesus calls us to love, we must put to death (‘mortify’) any impulses arising from our unspiritual selves that resist the call, and give ourselves in love. If we do this, we will live.

**<sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.**

**<sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.**

**<sup>12</sup>So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – <sup>13</sup>for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.**

**<sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons [NRSV 'children'] of God.**

**<sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,**

**but you have received the spirit of adoption.**

**When we cry 'Abba! Father!'**

**<sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,**

**<sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ**

The life which we experience through the gift of the Spirit of Christ is the life of God, the life of communion in the love which flows between the risen Christ and his Father. We are invited by love into God's family, where, as adopted children, we share the life of 'God's own Son' (8:3). In verses sixteen and seventeen, Paul speaks of us as 'children' (Greek: *tekna*). In verse fourteen, however, he speaks of both men and women as 'sons' (*huioi*). This says two things which the word 'children' does not. First, it states that we are children because we are living the life of God's *Son*, Jesus. Secondly, in Paul's culture, it links directly with the idea of being an heir since only male children inherited.

Jesus is the firstborn into the fullness of divine glory. As adopted children, living his life, we are given the promise that inheritance is to be ours. Experiencing the Spirit of his communion with God now, we are assured that we will inherit his risen glory.

Though the idea of adoption is not found in the Old Testament, Israel is called God's 'firstborn son' (Exodus 4:22), and is invited to call God 'my Father' (Hebrew: 'abî, Jeremiah 3:19). The nearest we get to an individual *addressing* God as 'my Father' is in Psalm 89, where God says of David: 'He shall cry to me: "You are my Father (Hebrew: 'abî), my God, and the Rock of my salvation!"' (Psalm 89:26).

Early Christian tradition remembers Jesus calling on God in this intimate way. In the agony in Gethsemane, when his faith was tested to the limit, he continued to trust as he cried out to God: 'Abba (Aramaic: 'abbā), Father' (Mark 14:36). It is true that God now is our lord, and Paul can use the image of slavery to speak of his own relationship to his new lord (1:1). He speaks the same way of the relationship of other Christians (7:6). It is not, however, a relationship characterised by fear (the 'fear of the Lord' is something quite different, see commentary on 2Corinthians 5:11). God is a God of love and our relationship is a sharing in the communion of love enjoyed by the risen Christ. Through the gift of the Spirit we have been set free (8:2): 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2Corinthians 3:17). We are caught up in the prayer of Jesus himself, as his Spirit prays in the depths of our hearts:

Because you have received adoption as children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir.

– Galatians 4:6-7

Paul's thought soars as he contemplates the glory that will be ours when we attain our inheritance and enjoy the eternal communion of those raised to life. However, his eyes are on Jesus. While in this world Jesus suffered. Paul's gospel is not simply about Jesus' faith and love. It is about the faith and love of Jesus in the face of sin and suffering. As he wrote to the Galatians: 'It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!' (Galatians 3:1). In the same letter he prayed: 'may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Galatians 6:4). This is why he can thank God in his correspondence with the Corinthians that he himself is walking the way of the cross (2Corinthians 2:14). (On experiencing joy in suffering, see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6). Paul knows that the way to glory is through being faithful to love in the real circumstances of our lives in this time between the resurrection of Jesus and the parousia; and this means through suffering, but, as he wrote to the Corinthians: 'this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure' (2Corinthians 4:17).

His mind goes back to the story of Genesis which reflects on the fact that human sin adversely affects the whole of creation (see Genesis 3:17-19). When right order between human beings and God is disrupted, everything is out of joint. Instead of it being a garden, the world is rank with weeds, the walls are crumbling and it finds itself subject to pollution and decay. The Genesis narrative does not portray a temporal sequence of what it was like before the 'Fall' and what it is like after. Rather it is a reflection in story of what creation is meant to be as it comes from the hand of God, and what it is actually like because of sin.

Paul is also thinking of the promise of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22). As the story is told in Genesis, God subjected creation to its state of bondage. But because of who God is there was always hope. As creation groans under the weight of human sin, so creation yearns for 'the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints' (1Thessalonians 3:13). 'Through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness' (Galatians 5:5), and creation eagerly waits with us.

**<sup>17b</sup>if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.**

**<sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.**

**<sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;**

**<sup>20</sup>for the creation was subject to futility [*unable to attain its goal*], not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it, in hope**

We live in hope

[The hope is]

<sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now;

<sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

<sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

<sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Just as the created world suffers the effects of human sin, so it will share in the communion and the resplendent glory of those who live God's life. Everything is connected. We all belong to each other. We are all part of the one creation, and so the whole of creation 'groans together' (Greek: *sustenazō*), and suffers the pains of labour together (*sunōdinō*). We are part of this groaning, and it is pain that is to issue in new life. We 'have the Spirit' (8:9), which 'has been given to us' (5:5). But, as yet, it is like the firstfruits. The full harvest is yet to come. God has put 'his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment' (2Corinthians 1:22).

While we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish ... that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

- 2Corinthians 5:4-5

We are God's adopted sons (8:14), and therefore 'heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ' (8:17). We must await that part of sonship that is concerned with inheritance: 'the redemption of our bodies'. Complete salvation, therefore, must await 'the day of the Lord' (1Corinthians 5:5):

Now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

- Romans 5:9-10

At the same time, Paul can say that 'we were saved'. From God's side nothing more needs to be done. From our side, however, we must continue to open our hearts to God's gift and continue to say Yes to the inspiration of God's Spirit. We must continue 'patiently doing good' (2:7), and be 'steadfast in hope' (1Thessalonians 1:3), 'for we walk by faith, not by sight' (2Corinthians 5:7), 'because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal' (2Corinthians 4:18). We reflected on the nature of Christian hope in commenting upon Galatians 5:5. It is sufficient here to remember that while hope is concerned with the future it is not the same as longing. Rather it is the trust of one who can leave the future securely in God's hands, knowing God's faithfulness, and so focusing on the only thing that matters: 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

In our groaning, in our longing, we know that we are not alone. Jesus himself is longing for us to be with him in glory, and his Spirit within us groans as we groan. We breathe with Jesus' breath. Our love is Jesus' love poured into our hearts. 'We have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16). He is our 'righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1:30). Our prayer is Jesus' prayer in us, his breath, his Spirit, his communion with the Father. We are caught up in Jesus' love for his Father and in the peace which he enjoyed not only when he retired to a lonely place to pray, but also in those times of painful self-giving when he emptied himself to be with others in their need. It is this prayer of Jesus – a prayer of transfiguration but also a prayer of agony – which is his gift to us.

The prayer of Jesus wells up from our 'inmost self' (7:22). In the temple of our bodies there is heard a prayer of wonder, of praise, of gratitude, of trust, of supplication. This prayer is beyond our comprehension, for it is Jesus himself who is praying in us. His prayer can be experienced in ecstatic rapture. It can be experienced in the gift of tongues (see the commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:2). It can be experienced in the Prayer of Quiet. It can be experienced in the fleeting movements of desire and love, the fleeting glances when we look at the one who never takes his eyes off us. We are weak, but we are not alone: Jesus' Spirit 'helps us' (Greek: *sunantilambanetai*). Whatever our weakness, we can experience the fruit of Jesus' contemplation and love.

Paul goes on to stress again that the initiative in all this belongs to God. It is an initiative of God's gracious love. It is God who draws everyone into divine communion and who longs to share with us the divine life, peace and glory. It is Jesus who revealed this and it is Jesus's love, given us by his Spirit, that makes it possible for us.

To open our minds and hearts in faith to the prayer of the Spirit is to make it possible for the whole created universe to give expression to its ultimate purpose in being caught up in a universal hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God.

**<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;**

**for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.**

**<sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

**<sup>28</sup>We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**

Our oldest papyrus manuscript as well as Origen and important early codexes have God as the subject of verse twenty-eight: ‘God works all things for good for those who love God’. Paul has just been speaking about the Spirit of God coming to our help. Here he goes on to say that whatever happens to us God can use to draw us to him. The weight of evidence, however, favours the translation of the NRSV which has ‘we’ as the subject. The meaning is basically the same. Since God is love, God does not force our will. For God’s grace to be effective we must welcome it and respond. This is what Paul means by ‘love God’. Our mind goes to key texts of the Old Testament:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:4-5

I show steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

– Deuteronomy 5:10

To ‘love God’ means to welcome God’s love and to respond faithfully to the covenant. In light of how basic this idea is to the Old Testament, it comes as something of a surprise that this is one of only three texts in which Paul speaks of our love for God. Both the others find echoes in our present text. The first is a quotation:

As it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’.

– 1 Corinthians 2:9

Anyone who loves God is known by him.

– 1 Corinthians 8:3

It is not that the concept is rare. Rather it is that when Paul speaks of our primary response to God he prefers to use the language of faith.

Paul’s focus here and in the following verses is on God: on God’s call and on God’s design. He has already insisted on the universal scope of God’s loving will, declaring that ‘one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all’(5:18). However, to be effective God’s design requires our response in faith (our ‘love’). It is effective ‘for all who believe’(3:22), for ‘the one who has the faith of Jesus’(3:26), and so Paul is especially addressing those whom he described in the opening sentence as ‘yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ’(1:6).

Once we realised that God does not exist in time, words like ‘fore-know’ (Greek: *proginōskō*; also 11:2) and ‘fore-ordain’ (*proorizō*; also 1 Corinthians 2:7) must be understood as referring to ontological priority, not temporal. It is God’s purpose which is foundational and it is this to which Paul is drawing attention. It is God’s knowing of us that enables our knowing of God.

The word ‘knowing’ carries with it all the intimacy of its use in the Scriptures where it refers to the knowledge that comes only through communion in love. It is this kind of knowledge of which God speaks when he says of Abraham: ‘I have known (Hebrew: *yadāh*) him’ (Genesis 18:19); and when he says to Jeremiah: ‘I knew you’ (Jeremiah 1:5); and to Israel: ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth’ (Amos 3:2). Recall Paul’s words quoted on the previous page: ‘Anyone who loves God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3). Recall also Paul’s words to the Galatians: ‘Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again?’ (Galatians 4:9).

Prior to any response we might or might not make, God’s design for us is that we ‘be conformed to the image of his Son’. This is what ‘God decreed (*proorizō*) before the ages for our glory’ (1 Corinthians 2:7). This is already happening as ‘we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul is referring to ‘the glory of Christ, who is the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4). We will only be fully ‘conformed’ to Christ when we are united with him in the life of the resurrection, of which life he is the ‘firstborn’.

This is God’s design, born of his love. It is to this fullness of communion in love, the communion experienced by the risen Jesus, that we are called (see verse twenty-eight). It is no wonder that we hear Paul ‘urging and encouraging and pleading’ with the Thessalonians: ‘that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory’ (1 Thessalonians 2:12). ‘For this purpose he called you ... so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Having called us, God offers us his Spirit, the communion of love which he shares with the risen Jesus. If we welcome this gift in faith, we will be drawn into Jesus’ communion and so find ourselves in the relationship with God that God intends for us (we will, in the terms of this letter, be ‘justified’). As we have just observed, we begin to share in the glory of God as we are transformed into Christ. We will experience it to the full when we, too, have passed through death and are taken up with Jesus into glory.

**<sup>29</sup>For those whom he fore-knew he also predestined [*‘fore-ordained’*] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.**

**<sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined [*‘fore-ordained’*] he also called;**

**and those whom he called he also justified;**

**and those whom he justified he also glorified.**

**<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?**

**<sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?**

Paul's grounds for confidence go beyond those of the prophet who could write: 'He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?' (Isaiah 50:8-9); or of the psalmist: 'With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?' (Psalm 118:6). As Paul has already said: 'all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (8:28). God can make even unjust opposition and condemnation work for our good.

Paul is confident because God 'gave up his own Son for all of us'. He is echoing what he wrote earlier of God 'sending his own Son' (8:3); 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (5:8). Some suggest that there is an allusion here to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. God blessed him: 'for you have not withheld your son, your only son' (Genesis 22:16). This may be so, but there is no evidence in Jewish writings of the time that Abraham was willing to offer up his son *out of love for others*. It is seen, rather, as an act of supreme obedience.

Paul's focus in this passage is entirely on God, and on God's love in giving up his own Son for us. As he wrote earlier: 'Jesus our Lord was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Romans 4:25). The language echoes that of the suffering servant of Isaiah: 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all ... he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:6,12).

The basis of Paul's confidence is expressed in his words to the Galatians: 'the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). In doing so, Jesus was faithfully following what he perceived as the mission given him by God. God gave us Jesus to reveal his love, risking him to our sinful rejection. It is this loving divine initiative which gives Paul the confidence that, having given his own Son, God will give us everything we need to be faithful to his grace and to resist anything that could bring about our condemnation.

God will not bring charges against us. It is God who has chosen us and who has made us righteous through the gift of Jesus' love poured into our hearts by his Holy Spirit (5:5). Having made us righteous, God will declare us righteous at the judgment.

Jesus will not condemn us. He 'was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Romans 4:25). Now he is 'at the right hand of God'. We recall the words of God spoken through Isaiah:

Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

– Isaiah 41:10

God is exercising his saving power through Jesus. We recall Peter's words on the occasion of the first Pentecost:

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

– Acts 2:33

Paul has already spoken of Jesus' Spirit interceding for us (8:26-27). Here we see the exalted Jesus acting as our mediator with God. Paul goes on to list the forces that are powerless to separate us from 'the love of Christ'. This all-encompassing genitive construction includes Christ's love for us, but speaks also of his love for God and of the communion in love which we experience with him through the gift of his Spirit.

He begins by listing some of the 'sufferings of this present time' (8:18; compare 2Corinthians 11:26-27; 12:10). They are as powerless to separate us from love as they were to separate the faithful persecuted Jews whose lament Paul quotes. The psalmist is troubled that they suffer 'for your sake'. Paul, however, has come to see suffering as uniting us with the suffering Christ, and so holding out the promise of our being united to him in glory. As he wrote to the Thessalonians in reference to their sufferings: 'you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for' (1Thessalonians 3:3). And to the Corinthians: 'we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh' (2Corinthians 4:10-11). Paul, therefore, can rejoice in his suffering (5:3; see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6).

**<sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect?**

**Is it [NRSV 'It is'] God who justifies?**

**<sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn?**

**Is it [NRSV 'It is'] Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?**

**<sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ?**

**Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**

**<sup>36</sup>As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered'.**

(Psalm 44:23)

Nothing can separate us from God's love

<sup>37</sup>**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who is loving us [NRSV 'who loved us'].**

<sup>38</sup>**For I am convinced that**

**neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,**

**nor powers,**

<sup>39</sup>**nor height, nor depth,**

**nor anything else in all creation,**

**will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

The fact that we are able to remain faithful to God by continuing to love through 'the sufferings of this present time'(8:18) is not due to any strength of our own. It is because the risen Jesus is loving us. In speaking of Christ's love, Paul uses an aorist participle. Lacking any specific nuance, this is the simplest way to speak of Jesus' loving. It is better translated by an English present form. His love is experienced by us as the gift of the Spirit dwelling in our hearts (5:5) and it is through the power of the Spirit that we are sustained in 'faith working through love'(Galatians 5:6).

Paul now widens his perspective. What about the powerful cosmic forces that affect our lives? Can these separate us from God's love in Christ? He uses contrasting pairs to cover the whole range of reality. Death cannot separate us from this love. 'In Christ Jesus' we have been set free from its dominion (see 8:2). As he wrote to the Corinthians: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' (1Corinthians 15:54).

The world or life or death or the present or the future — all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

– 1Corinthians 3:22-23

Scholars are uncertain of the exact nuance of 'rulers' as distinct from 'angels'. Paul may intend to cover the whole range of the angelic world from good to bad angels, or he may be going from the lowest to the highest ranks in the angelic world. Present suffering is always bearable. It is the thought of what might happen in the future that tends to cripple us with fear. The future, however, is only real when it is present, and as Paul says elsewhere; 'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:14).

'Powers' covers all forms of superterrestrial powers that were thought of as influencing the running of the world in the cosmology with which Paul was acquainted. Whatever power these creatures may have, they have no power to separate us from God's love in Christ. The same can be said of 'height' and 'depth'— referring, seemingly, to the stars at their zenith or their nadir. These were understood to be living creatures of the greatest power, consisting only of the element of fire. Paul covers every possibility in his final 'nor anything else in all creation'.

With this hymn to God's love, Paul concludes his presentation of the essence of the gospel, for the proclamation of which he was called to be an apostle (see 1:1).

## Introduction to Romans 9:1 - 11:36

Paul has just presented the new grace-gift of God. It is union with Christ. This communion breaks the dominion of sin by empowering us with Christ's Spirit. It also gives us assurance of salvation if we accept this grace with faith, commit our life to him, and carry out the implications of this communion in our behaviour.

He has presented this new way powerfully and beautifully. He has done so with the hope of attracting a faithful Jew to see in it a way of life that takes him/her beyond the law, but is consistent with it; indeed, this new way brings the law to its promised goal.

However, certain problems remain. Sustained by what they know of Jesus and by their experience of his Spirit, Christians are being asked to live in hope of a promised, but not yet fully experienced, salvation. It had been the same for the Jews. They, too, had been asked to live in hope, and they had placed their trust in the same God. Yet many of them, by failing to embrace Christ, were failing to receive the promise.

Paul wants to place beyond suspicion the fidelity of God, in spite of human failure. To do this he attempts to establish three things.

Firstly, at the time Paul is writing, only a small minority of Jews were accepting Christ, and so enjoying the promises made to Abraham. Paul wants to make it clear that this situation is the result of widespread human failure to believe. It in no way calls into question God's justice or God's fidelity. In making this point, Paul reminds the Christians that exactly the same thing can happen to them. If it does, it will be for the same reason: their failure to believe, not God's failure to keep his promise.

Secondly, Paul has just claimed that nothing can separate a Christian from the love of God in Christ. By our sin we can reject the love that is being offered to us; but nothing can stop God loving, and nothing outside us can come in between us and God's love. He wants to show that it is the same for a Jew. God has not changed.

Thirdly, he wants to present human history, with all its failures, as embraced by divine mercy. This does not take away the certainty of sin reaping its own self-inflicted punishment, nor does it replace the need for faith on our part. But it does put both of these in a wider perspective. It is the mercy of God which transcends everything else.

**<sup>1</sup>I am speaking the truth in Christ**

**— I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit —**

**<sup>2</sup> I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.**

**<sup>3</sup>For I could wish that I myself were anathema (NRSV 'accursed') and cut off from Christ**

**for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.**

In the first section of this letter, Paul attempted to establish that, though the message of salvation proclaimed in the gospel is 'for the Jew first'(1:16), and though Jews have the privilege of the law, they are, in fact, under the same dominion of sin as everyone else, and they have no privileged position as regards God's justice and punishment. Nor do they have a privileged place as regards justification and salvation: they are to find these, like everyone else, through faith in what God has revealed in Christ. This led Paul to ask the question: 'Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?'(3:1). His immediate answer was: 'Much in every way'(3:2). At that point, he was content to mention two advantages. The first is that 'Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God'(3:2). The second is that 'through the law comes the knowledge of sin'(3:20). He kept his full response for the present passage.

We catch here a glimpse of Paul's passionate love for his own people, even though they caused him so much suffering (see Acts 20:19). We note also that when Paul reveals his innermost convictions, in the same breath that he speaks of his conscience, he speaks of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Speaking from his communion in love, Paul assures them that he suffers 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart' over them. He loves them so much and wants them to be open to the gospel so much, that, if it would help them, he is willing to be 'anathema' (see Galatians 1:8-9; 1Corinthians 16:22), that is to say, separated from the community, offered up to God and left exposed and defenceless before the fire of God's judgment.

He makes this more explicit when, leaving reason behind, he declares that he is willing to be 'cut off from Christ' – Christ to whom he is totally committed, heart and soul, and the community of love to which he belongs. This cry from the heart expresses something of the depth of Paul's pain and of his love for his fellow Jews. It has a special pathos when we recall what he has just said about nothing being able to separate us from 'the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'(8:39).

There is an echo here of the prayer which Moses offered to God after the apostasy of his people:

If you will only forgive their sin — but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.

– Exodus 32:32

Paul lists eight privileges which are enjoyed by ‘his kindred according to the flesh’. He refers to his people as ‘Israelites’, the name given by God (Genesis 32:28). In doing so he emphasises God’s call and God’s promises. They are God’s chosen and holy people.

The first privilege is ‘sonship’ (Greek: *huiiothesia*). They enjoy the privilege of being God’s ‘firstborn’: ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son’ (Exodus 4:22). ‘You are sons of the Lord, your God’ (Deuteronomy 14:1). This intimate relationship is poignantly expressed by Hosea (read Hosea 11:1-9). Jeremiah gives voice to God’s longing: ‘I thought you would call me, My Father’ (Hebrew: ‘abî; Jeremiah 3:19). This and the other privileges reach their climax in the promised Messiah who has come ‘from them’.

The final doxology needs some explanation. Ancient manuscripts are written in capitals and have virtually no punctuation. The New Jerusalem Bible joins the NRSV in placing a comma after ‘Messiah’. This makes the concluding words, including the word ‘God’, appear to apply to the Messiah. If this is Paul’s intention, it would make this text the earliest instance in the New Testament of Christ being referred to directly as ‘God’. Other interpreters (see, for example, the New American Bible and the Revised English Bible) place a period after ‘Messiah’, and understand the conclusion to be a doxology addressed to God in praise of all that God has done for Israel, with special emphasis on his gift of the Messiah

We are left in no doubt of Paul’s loyalty to the faith he has inherited or of his love for his fellow Jews. In embracing Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, Paul knows that he has found a way of living Judaism in a complete way and of taking the faith he has inherited to the world. In this way he sees himself as part of the vanguard, bringing about at last the fulfilment of the hopes of his people, hopes born of the promises made to Abraham.

Freed from the historical limits developed over the centuries, Judaism, as lived by the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, can now reach out to the whole world, revealing that God is love and that everyone in the world is embraced by the love of the one God. People are not called to change their culture, to stop being who they are and to become something different. They do not have to stop being a Greek or a Roman and become a Jew. All that is asked of them is that they welcome the wonderful grace pouring out over the world through the love revealed in the living and in the dying of Jesus: welcome it in faith. It breaks Paul’s heart that most of his fellow Jews cannot see God in Jesus and continue to do what the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem did when they rejected and crucified their Messiah.

**<sup>4</sup>They are Israelites  
and to them belong  
the sonship  
[NRSV ‘adoption’]  
the glory,  
the covenants,  
the giving of  
the law,  
the worship,  
and the promises;  
<sup>5</sup>to them belong  
the patriarchs,  
and from them,  
according to  
the flesh, comes  
the Messiah.  
God who is  
over all be  
blessed forever.  
Amen.**

**[NRSV ‘the  
Messiah, who  
is over all, God  
blessed forever.  
Amen.**

**<sup>6</sup>It is not as though the word of God has failed.**

**For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup>and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.'**(Genesis 21:12)

**<sup>8</sup>This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.**

**<sup>9</sup>For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son'**(Genesis 18:10,14).

**<sup>10</sup>Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband our ancestor Isaac.**

**<sup>11</sup>Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, <sup>12</sup> not by works but by his call) she was told, 'the elder will serve the younger'**(Genesis 25:23).

**<sup>13</sup>As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but I have hated Esau'**(Malachi 1:2).

Faced with the fact that most Jews were not, in fact, embracing the Messiah, some of the Jews in Rome, including some of the Jewish Christians, might wonder what has happened to God's promises. They have been taught to rely on God's word (read Numbers 23:19; Isaiah 55:10-11). It might appear that 'the word of God has failed'. In attempting to demonstrate that the failure is not God's, Paul begins by asking them to look again at God's word and to note that God never said that physical descent on its own would automatically mean that people would experience the fulfilment of God's promises. They must focus their reflections on God and on God's choice. The examples Paul uses establish this point quite successfully.

We should note in passing the significance of the words 'love' and 'hate' in the quotation from Malachi. Throughout the Old and New Testament they focus, not on feeling, but on choice. To love is to choose; to hate is to not choose. We find the same language in Genesis 29:30-31 where Jacob chooses Rachel in preference to Leah.

Paul's examples, while establishing the point which he wishes to make, also open up a further problem. It might appear that Ishmael and Esau had no hope. It might appear that God makes arbitrary choices, unjustly counting some in and some out. They might make it appear that God is unjust in his treatment of human beings.

It is just this kind of thinking that Paul wants to expose as wrong. However it was a mind-set that was common among Jews of Paul's day to think that God has chosen the Jews and rejected the Gentiles. Paul himself, no doubt, shared this way of thinking till he was enlightened on the road to Damascus. He does not immediately contradict it. Rather, as the following verses demonstrate, he begins by insisting that his readers keep their eyes fixed on God and see that everything flows from God's mercy.

The question concerns God's justice. Paul's response focuses immediately on God's mercy. Justice in relation to God refers both to God himself and to God's relations with creation. In regard to God himself it refers to the fact that God always acts according to his nature. In regard to God's relations with creation it refers to God's *judgment* concerning people's behaviour. The tradition is that God judges us according to our behaviour and Paul could have responded along those lines. However, in keeping with Paul's focus throughout this whole section, Paul speaks of God's mercy. Since justice refers to the fact that God always acts according to his nature, Paul wants to make the point that it is God's nature to be merciful. In relation to creation mercy focuses, not on God's response to our behaviour, but on God's *initiative*. The focus is on God's creative and redemptive purpose, prior to and independent of how a particular person might accept or reject it.

Paul goes to the very heart of the Torah which recounts how God in his mercy redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Paul takes us to the ruler of Egypt, the pharaoh, and refers to him in traditional biblical language as having his heart hardened by God. Were he focusing on the human dimension he would have spoken of human freedom and of pharaoh's rejection of grace. However, Paul does not want to deflect their attention from God, and so he sees even pharaoh's sin as coming within the providence of God, and he insists that God, in his mercy, used even the effects of pharaoh's refusal, as a means of revealing God's mercy. Not even Egypt could cause God to not be a God of mercy.

This could lead to a third objection. If pharaoh's stubborn resistance in refusing to listen to God was part of God's providence in revealing his mercy, why should we accuse pharaoh of sin? Why should we accuse anyone of sin? It would seem that we are just puppets in God's plan for the world, fulfilling the role assigned to us and quite unable to resist God's will: 'Why does God still find fault? For who can resist God's will?' Paul takes up this problem immediately.

*<sup>14</sup>What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part?*

**By no means!**

**<sup>15</sup>For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'**

(Exodus 33:19)

**<sup>16</sup>So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.**

**<sup>17</sup>For the scripture says to pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'**(Exodus 9:16)

**<sup>18</sup>So then he has mercy upon whom-ever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.**

**<sup>19</sup>You will say to me then,**

*‘Why then does he still  
find fault? For who can  
resist his will?’*

**<sup>20</sup> But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who moulds it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’**

**<sup>21</sup>Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for special use and another for ordinary use?**

**<sup>22</sup>What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience [*‘magnanimous love’*] the objects of wrath that are made for destruction;**

**<sup>23</sup>and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory —**

**<sup>24</sup>including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?**

The ‘you’ in verses nineteen and twenty is singular. Paul is inviting each person to enter into dialogue with him in this discussion.

Paul could have responded to this objection by moving the argument to the human plain of decision, free choice and divine justice. However, he does not attempt a philosophical resolution to the problem of the relationship between the divine will and the exercise of human freedom. He accepts both as clearly true, and so would reject any solution to the problem that ignores either. This passage, like the previous one, is concerned with divine purpose and initiative, and so with divine mercy.

He reminds the reader of the limits of human ability to understand the profound mystery that is God. His response echoes the Book of Job and draws on both Jeremiah and Isaiah in likening us to clay, moulded by our Creator.

You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?

– Isaiah 29:16

Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, ‘What are you making’?

– Isaiah 45:9

Whatever might be the different uses for which a potter fashions vessels from clay, Paul reasserts the truth that everything willed by God is with a view to his ultimate purpose, which is to show mercy.

Even when – as was the case with the pharaoh whom Paul used as an example in the previous verses – we stubbornly resist God’s will, God uses this very hardness of heart to bring about his merciful purpose. Such stubborn resistance calls down God’s wrath, but God’s mercy patiently holds back even the punishment which sin deserves, in order to effect God’s transcendent purpose, which is to show mercy.

For an understanding of the references to ‘wrath’ see Paul’s full development of the theme in the first section of this letter (1:18-32) and the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10. God will not tolerate oppression, nor will God tolerate his plans of mercy being frustrated. God is passionately concerned to liberate people from all kinds of slavery. The latest proof is the redemption effected in Christ. Those who in spite of God’s patience continue to attempt to obstruct God’s merciful design will have to bear the consequences of their obstinacy. Note that when Paul writes of ‘the objects of wrath that are made for destruction’ he does not say that God made them for this purpose. If any are in fact destroyed, it will be because of sin for which ‘they are without excuse’(1:20); it will be because they have obstinately refused God’s persistent concern drawing them to repentance (see 2:4). By contrast he says of ‘the objects of mercy’ that it is God who has ‘prepared them beforehand for glory’.

This includes ‘us whom God has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles’. The fact that there are Gentiles, too, in the Christian community (descendants of Ishmael and Esau included) shows that the apparent rejection of Ishmael and Esau did not represent God’s merciful design. We recall Paul’s earlier words:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

– Romans 8:28-30

<sup>25</sup>As indeed he says in Hosea "Those who were not my people, I will call "my people", and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved""(Hosea 1:9; 2:23).

<sup>26</sup>And 'in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they shall be called "children of the living God"'(Hosea 1:10).

<sup>27</sup>And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved;

<sup>28</sup>for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively.'  
(Isaiah 10:22-23)

<sup>29</sup>And as Isaiah predicted 'If the Lord of hosts had not left seed (NRSV 'survivors') to us we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah'(Isaiah 1:9).

Thanks to the revelation of God that we received from the Messiah Jesus, we have come to see that God wants the Gentiles – the descendants of Ishmael and Esau – to be God's 'people', God's 'beloved'. They are 'children of the living God' with all the richness of that expression as developed earlier by Paul. They are sharing in the life of God's own Son, having received the 'Spirit of adoption' (8:15). Furthermore, though in fact most Jews have not (yet) welcomed their Messiah, there is a 'seed', as God proclaimed through Isaiah, and this seed holds the promise of a great harvest. This 'seed' are those Jews who have welcomed what God is offering in Christ and are part of the people of the new covenant.

Paul adds the words 'quickly and decisively' to the statement from Isaiah (perhaps drawing on Isaiah 28:22 where both words occur). His intention may be to underline the definitive nature of God's saving action in Jesus. In welcoming the Gentiles, God is certainly not rejecting the Jews.

What matters for everyone, for Jews as well as Gentiles, is that we share the faith of Jesus. God's initiative is always merciful. Learning from their past and attending now to the gospel, Jews as well as non-Jews are asked only to believe – that is to say, to welcome God's loving offer of grace and salvation with the same welcome given to it by the Messiah, Jesus.

The presence of Gentiles in the Christian community in Rome and elsewhere shows that communion in God's life is not limited to the Jews. The Gentiles can enjoy being in a right relationship – a communion of love – with God if they open their minds and hearts to welcome God's offer of grace.

The fact that the majority of Jews have not welcomed their Messiah shows that belonging to the Jewish race does not automatically mean enjoying divine communion. Like the Gentiles, they must welcome God's offer of grace. It is important not to misunderstand Paul by interpreting verse thirty-two, as is sometimes done, as a criticism of Judaism as a religion. Judaism acknowledged the principle that justification and salvation were not earned by 'works', but were to be accepted in joyful faith. Paul's criticism, like that of the prophets before him, and of Jesus, was directed at those who, in spite of the inspiration of their religion, failed to believe (see commentary on 4:1-25).

To support his point, Paul turns to Isaiah. In Isaiah 28:16, God, dwelling in the temple of David's city (Mount Zion), is the one on whom the people can trust, and not their princes. In Isaiah 8:14, God becomes a stumbling block because of the people's lack of faith. Paul sees this fulfilled in the one whom God has sent to carry out his will, his Messiah Jesus. Those who believe in him will not trust in vain. Those who reject him will stumble. They failed to believe because they found the cross a cause of scandal; they failed to believe in a suffering Messiah.

<sup>30</sup>**What then are we to say?**

**Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith;**

<sup>31</sup>**but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law.**

<sup>32</sup>**Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works.**

**They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, <sup>33</sup>as it is written,**

**'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'**

(Isaiah 28:16 in the light of 8:14)

**<sup>1</sup>Brothers and sisters,  
my heart's desire and  
prayer to God for  
them is that they may  
be saved.**

**<sup>2</sup>I can testify that they  
have a zeal for God,  
but it is not enlight-  
ened.**

**<sup>3</sup>For, being ignorant of  
God's righteousness  
[NRSV 'the righteous-  
ness that comes from  
God']**

**and seeking to estab-  
lish their own,  
they have not submit-  
ted to God's right-  
eousness.**

**<sup>4</sup>For Christ is the goal  
[NRSV 'end'] of the  
law,  
so that there may be  
righteousness for eve-  
ryone who believes.**

Once again Paul gives expression to his deep love for his fellow Jews (see 9:1-3). On the whole they continue to reject their Messiah, but this does not stop Paul longing and praying for their salvation.

He draws on his own experience as a Pharisee (see Galatians 1:13-14; Acts 22:3) to define what he sees as the main reason for their failure to believe. They are genuinely zealous for God, but they do not see the way in which God has revealed his righteousness in Jesus. The expression 'righteousness of God', being a simple genitive in Greek, can include the meaning expressed in the translation given here by the NRSV, but Paul's primary focus here is surely on God. It seems better to stay closer to the Greek and translate 'God's righteousness' (see commentary on 1:17).

Note again, that Paul's criticism in verse three is not directed at Judaism. Rather, it is directed at those Jews who, like himself prior to his conversion, fail to recognise Jesus as the one through whom God has revealed his will to save. Paul hopes that they will recognise their error.

In the previous passage Paul used the language of the athletic tournaments with which the Romans were familiar when he spoke of people 'striving' for righteousness. He continues the imagery here, stating that all this striving has only one goal, and that is to be with Jesus living in the intimacy of divine communion. Ultimately, this is the purpose of the law itself, for it is through the gift of Christ's own Spirit that we become righteous, sharing with him the righteousness of God.

This is the way for the Gentiles. It is also the way for the Jews. God has revealed his righteousness through the gift of Jesus and it is through communion with him that there will be 'righteousness for everyone who believes'. As Paul wrote when first setting down the theme of his letter:

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to every-  
one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

– Romans 1:16

This passage enlarges upon the statement Paul has just made that Christ is the goal of the law. It is true, as Leviticus says, that obeying God's will as expressed in the Law would mean life for those who were faithful to the covenant ('righteous') in this way. The problem, as he has already indicated, is that the law does not provide the power to enable a person to be faithful. In spite of the law, people remain under the dominion of sin. Now, however, God promises life through communion with Jesus. This divine love-communion is the right relationship ('righteousness') that God wills everyone to enjoy. The welcoming of this gift is what Paul means by 'faith'.

The problem was never with God's word. As the text from Deuteronomy insists, God's word was always near and accessible. This is especially so now that God's word has been expressed in Jesus and proclaimed in the gospel which Paul is commissioned to preach. The Jews did not have to cross the seas, scale the heights or plumb the depths to discover God's will for themselves. This is even more true now that the Torah has reached its goal in Jesus. Paul applies the text from Deuteronomy to the Christian acknowledgment from the heart that 'Jesus is Lord' (compare 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5), having been raised to life from the dead by God (see 4:24).

The universality of God's offer of justification and salvation in Christ is emphasized from scripture (Isaiah 28:16 is quoted also in 9:33). God's offer is made to all without distinction (see 3:22): 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved' (compare Acts 2:21). Paul's words here help us appreciate the depth of meaning in his address to the Corinthians:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

– 1 Corinthians 1:2

**<sup>5</sup>Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by [in] them' (Leviticus 18:5).**

**<sup>6</sup>But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (Deuteronomy 30:12) (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup>or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (Psalm 107:26) (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).**

**<sup>8</sup>But what does it say? 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (Deuteronomy 30:14) (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);**

**<sup>9</sup>because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**

**<sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.**

**<sup>11</sup>The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame' (Isaiah 28:16).**

**<sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.**

**<sup>13</sup>For, 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Joel 2:32).**

They are without excuse

**<sup>14</sup>But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup>And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’(Isaiah 52:7)**

**<sup>16</sup>But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’**  
(Isaiah 53:1)

**<sup>17</sup>So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.**

*<sup>18</sup>But I say: Surely, they have not heard!*

**Indeed they have; for ‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world’(Psalm 19:4).**

*<sup>19</sup>But I say: Surely, Israel did not understand!*

**First Moses says, ‘I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.’(Deut. 32:21)**

**<sup>20</sup>Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me’(Isaiah 65:1).**

**<sup>21</sup>But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people’ (Isaiah 65:2).**

Paul is disposing of possible excusing causes for the Jews who have not believed in Christ. Of course there were Jews living in various parts of the sprawling Empire who had not yet heard the gospel proclaimed. Paul is not speculating about them. He is speaking of those in Palestine, in Rome and in the various cities visited by Paul himself who have heard. The problem is that, as in the case of those criticised by Isaiah, they have failed to listen; they have failed to obey.

It is true that ‘faith comes from what is heard’ (see also Galatians 3:2,5). We recall Paul’s words in an earlier letter:

We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.

– 1Thessalonians 3:13

The genitive expression ‘word of Christ’ includes the word spoken by Christ as well as the word of the gospel which is about Christ.

He quotes Psalm 19:4 to support his claim that Jews who reject the gospel cannot be excused on the grounds that they have not heard it. Nor can they excuse themselves on the grounds that ‘the word of Christ’ was beyond their comprehension. If the Gentiles could embrace the good news, as indicated in the texts from Deuteronomy and Isaiah, there is no excuse for the Jews.

The final quotation makes the point that in rejecting Jesus the Jews are continuing the disobedience spoken of by Isaiah. Indeed, they are without excuse (see 1:20). It also accents the fact that God’s mercy is without end, and that, in spite of their rejection ‘all day long I have held out my hands’ to them. It is this steadfast love of God that gives grounds for the hope that Paul holds out for his people – a hope that emerges as the central theme of the following chapter.

Paul establishes the fact that God has not rejected Israel: 'For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage' (Psalm 94:14). His own experience is proof of this. God 'foreknew' (Greek: *proginōskō*) his people, that is to say, he 'knew' them in love prior to any response of acceptance or rejection (see 8:20), and God is faithful. Paul recalls the story of Elijah. Though many in Israel were unfaithful, there remained a remnant, and in them could be seen God's choice.

So it is 'at the present time'. He insists again that it is a matter of gift (see 3:24; 9:16), not of something merited on the basis of performance of works (see 4:4).

In verse seven, he looks beyond the sphere of human choice to that of divine providence and design. Some Jews (those who have joined the Christian community) have obtained what Israel was seeking. He speaks of these as God's 'elect'. Others have not. He has already securely established that the failure of some Jews to respond is due to their unbelief (9:30-31; 10:14-21). Nothing he says here goes back on that. He knows, however, that we are not limited to this human sphere. Those who reject faith are 'hardened'. He recalls traditional language about God hardening them, not to take away their responsibility, but to focus attention on what God is doing here, for everything comes within the scope of God's providence.

Without God's presence and action there would be no hope. By taking us to this higher plane, Paul is preparing us for what God, who has not rejected his people, will do. It is in God's action that we find our source of hope.

*<sup>1</sup>I ask, then, has God rejected his people?*

**By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.**

**<sup>2</sup>God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.**

**Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? <sup>3</sup>Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life'**(1 Kings 19:10,14,18).

**<sup>4</sup>But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal'**(1Kings 19:18).

**<sup>5</sup>So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.**

**<sup>6</sup>But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.**

*<sup>7</sup>What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking?*

**The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, <sup>8</sup>as it is written, 'God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day'**(Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 29:10).

**<sup>9</sup>And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; <sup>10</sup>let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and keep their backs continually [NRSV 'forever'] bent'**(Ps 69:22-23).

*<sup>11</sup>So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?*

**By no means!**

**But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.**

**<sup>12</sup>Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!**

**<sup>13</sup>Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry <sup>14</sup>in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them.**

**<sup>15</sup>For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!**

**<sup>16</sup>If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.**

**<sup>17</sup>But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, <sup>18</sup>do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.**

What is being witnessed in Israel's present rejection of the gospel is a stumbling, not a fall. Furthermore, in the providence of God their (temporary) stumbling has opened the way for salvation to come to the Gentiles. Immediately Paul leaps to the hope that one day Israel, jealous of the salvation enjoyed by the Gentiles, will accept the gospel and be included among those who are saved. If their temporary stumbling has been the occasion of such abundant blessings to the world, and especially to the Gentiles, imagine, says Paul, what it will be like when they, too, embrace the faith! This is his hope as he gives himself tirelessly to his ministry as 'apostle to the Gentiles'.

If the rejection of the gospel by Israel has, in the providence of God, meant the reconciling of the Gentile world to God (see 2Corinthians 5:19), their acceptance of it will be for Israel like a coming from death to a whole new life.

In verse sixteen, Paul seems to be referring to the faithful remnant of Israel, whose faith in Christ affects all Israel. Because the first portion of the communion sacrifice was set aside for the Lord, this made the whole meal something holy, fitting to be consumed by God's holy people. So, those Jews who have welcomed the gospel and joined themselves to the people of the new covenant hold out a promise of communion for all.

His second image of a holy root making the branches holy takes him to the image of grafting. The cutting off of some Jewish branches from the Jewish stock has opened the way for the grafting in of Gentile branches.

He moves to the second personal singular from 11:17-24, engaging each of the community as a teacher engages students. He invites each of them to consider how much they owe to Judaism.

Paul stresses that branches were cut off because they did not believe. The same will happen to Gentile branches if they do not believe. Divine mercy is assured, and God's fidelity to his promise is absolutely beyond question. But it is always possible for us to reject belief: 'if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall' (1Corinthians 10:12). On the other hand, if a rejected branch believes, it will be grafted on again. This is Paul's confident hope for Israel.

This passage offers a special invitation to any of us who have fallen away from faith for whatever reason. God has the power to graft us in again. The cost of being grafted in again is nothing less than a crucifixion. We have to be 'baptised into his death'(6:3), 'united with him in a death like his'(6:5). It means having 'our old self crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed'(6:6). As Jesus said:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

– Mark 8:34-37

Such a way is possible if we believe in him, and the result of such a crucifixion will be that we can 'walk in newness of life'(6:4); we can 'be united with him in a resurrection like his' (6:5); we will 'no longer be enslaved to sin'(6:6). We pray for the grace to listen to our deepest longings and to be attracted to him in love. Only this love will give us the courage to go through and beyond the distracting noises that tell us that we cannot do it, that it is too late, that we are beyond innocence and beyond hope.

This passage is also a warning to those of us who think we believe, but whose faith, like branches cut off from an olive tree, is dead. It is the same kind of warning given us by James: 'A body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead'(James 2:26; see 1:17). 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves'(James 1:22). As Paul wrote in his Introduction, he has been commissioned to 'bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles'(1:5).

**19**You will say,  
*'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in'.*

**20**That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.

**21**For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

**22**Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

**23**And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.

**24**For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

God will have mercy on all

**<sup>25</sup>So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.**

**<sup>26</sup>and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' <sup>27</sup>And this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.'**

(Isaiah 59:20-21; 27:9)

**<sup>28</sup>As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake;**

**but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors.**

**<sup>29</sup>For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.**

**<sup>30</sup>Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,**

**<sup>31</sup>so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.**

**<sup>32</sup>For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.**

History can be examined on the human plane where it is a story of reception or rejection of grace. Here, in a truly magnificent conclusion to these three chapters, Paul transcends the human plane and all considerations of human guilt, to reveal the divine plan. He refers to what he is about to say as a 'mystery' (Greek: *mustērion*), that is to say, a truth that lies beyond human comprehension, but which has been revealed in Christ. It is a revelation of God's absolute fidelity: 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable'. It is a revelation of God's mercy: 'that he may be merciful to all'.

At the time of Paul's writing, the Jews, on the whole, are rejecting the gospel, and so 'as regards the gospel they are enemies of God'. This rejection, however, in the providence of God, has provided an opportunity for the Gentiles to embrace the gospel in a way that would not have been possible had the Jews accepted it. Their rejection, Paul reminds the Gentile Christians, is 'for your sake'.

'As regards the election', that is to say, from the point of view of God's choice of Israel, 'they are beloved'. 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable'. Paul is confident that, once the gospel has achieved its goal among the Gentiles, his people will embrace it, 'and so all Israel will be saved'. Everyone, Jew and Gentile, has been disobedient. Paul looks at this disobedience from the higher plane of divine providence and design, and he is confident that God will use even this disobedience to show his mercy.

This is the climax of Paul's thesis concerning the 'righteousness of God' that has been 'revealed' (see 1:17). It is the climax of his explanation of the nature of the gospel which he has been commissioned to preach: the gospel which is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (1:16).

Paul concludes with a hymn of praise to God, which demonstrates the absolute monotheism which is at the base of his profound conviction concerning the universality of the scope of the gospel.

All things are 'from him'. The whole of creation, and every human being, Jew or Gentile, has its source in the God of mercy who has revealed his righteousness in Christ.

All things are 'to him'. All have their goal in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All things are 'through him'. All things are brought into being, sustained in being, graced, drawn to repentance and forgiven, justified and saved by the one God who, through all the vagaries of human infidelity, wills to 'have mercy on all' (11:32).

Without the revelation of the mystery (11:25) - a revelation made on the cross - we could never have known God's wonderful and totally unmerited gift. 'To him be glory forever. Amen'.

**<sup>33</sup>0 the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.**

**<sup>34</sup>For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?' (Isaiah 40:13).**

**<sup>35</sup>Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return?' (Job 41:3)**

**<sup>36</sup>For from him and through him and to him are all things.**

**To him be the glory forever. Amen.**

Introduction to Romans 12:1 - 15:13

Faith for Paul, as for the whole of the Jewish tradition, is about the way we think. It is about what we know concerning God and ourselves in relation to God from God's self-revelation in creation and in human history. Faith is about our attitudes, and the choices which we make in our relationships with each other because of what God has revealed. There is a sense in which we can say that everything which Paul has written to this point has been in view of what he is about to say in this concluding section of his letter. The reason for his writing in the first place will be discovered here, where it emerges that there are problems in the Christian community in Rome that endanger the very essence of the gospel. There are problems in the way that different groups are failing to 'welcome one another just as Christ welcomed you' (15:7). The problem is made even more serious in that it is affecting the relationship between Gentiles and Jews, both Christian and non-Christian. There is no issue that concerned Paul more than the issue of Jewish-Gentile communion in the one community of faith. He knew that the building and the maintenance of this communion was a matter of love, and it is to love that he now turns his attention.

This section is concerned directly with Christian behaviour. To this point Paul's focus has been on God's righteousness, especially on the way in which God has revealed his righteousness in Jesus. Now he wants to focus on the righteousness which God has offered to us through our communion with his Son. He has insisted from the beginning that God's gift of salvation requires from us the free acceptance which he calls 'faith'. Now he wants to look at what faith looks like when it is real, and the kind of fruit which we should expect in the life of one who has what Paul calls 'the one thing that counts', namely, 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). Everything Paul has written to this point has highlighted the central importance of faith. It is clear that faith involves an acceptance of grace from God; but, as he said in the Introduction, and as he will repeat in the conclusion, it is an acceptance of grace with a view to obedience. Having attracted all to Jesus, and having shown what God is offering through Jesus, Paul now concentrates on the way of life that should characterise a disciple of Jesus.

In introducing the theme of his letter, Paul included a quotation from the prophet Habakkuk: 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (1:17). He wants now to examine what such a life involves. He has also said that what God has done for us in Jesus is so that 'we too might walk in newness of life' (6:4). He wants now to examine some key characteristics of this new way of life. If we truly have become 'slaves of righteousness' (6:18), how should we be living? Paul has demonstrated that righteousness is a divine gift, and that salvation comes through God's gracious love. He has kept Jesus before our eyes – his faith, his obedience, his life-giving and his love-giving. He has insisted that it is the Spirit of the risen Christ that is offered to all as his redeeming and saving gift, and he has invited all to be led by the same Spirit that inspired Jesus (8:14), the Spirit who makes such living possible. As he wrote to the Galatians: 'If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25).

Morality is the fruit of God's liberating love: it is Christ living in us. It is impossible to live a moral life free from sin without this gift, even with the law. This gift is, however, offered to all, without distinction, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul does not argue like the Stoics for the logic of his positions, or attempt to show that they are inherently consistent (see the commentary on Galatians 5:22). Nor does he present Christian morality as something that we can live by our own efforts so long as we are good-willed and rational. He invites people to faith. He invites people into the Christian community. He invites us to belong to Christ and to experience his indwelling Spirit. He shows what fruit can come from such a union, fruit that without such a union is quite impossible. He also points to behaviour that is inconsistent with living in the Spirit. His prayer is not for greater rationality and more responsible self-sufficiency, but that 'the power of Christ' (2 Corinthians 12:9) may dwell in us so that our lives will be lives of 'righteousness'.

Before commencing our commentary on this section in which Paul focuses explicitly on the moral dimension of Christian living, let us revisit a number of Paul's statements in the sections which we have just examined. He has spoken of his mission as one of bringing about the 'obedience of faith' (1:5). He has spoken of God's kindness as in view of 'leading you to repentance' (2:4). He has asked: 'How can we who died to sin go on living in it?' (6:2). He has told us that we were baptised so that 'we might walk in newness of life' (6:4). 'You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (6:11). He has urged us: 'present your members to God as instruments of righteousness ... for you have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted' (6:13,17). We are to 'bear fruit for God' (7:4), 'serve in the new life of the Spirit' (7:6) and 'walk according to the Spirit' (8:4). He has assured us: 'If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live' (8:13). He is now ready to examine what this means.

One final introductory comment. As will become evident in chapter fourteen, there is one major issue that is concerning Paul and it is the way in which different groups in the community are failing to respect each other's differences. The problem seems to be particularly between the Gentile and the Jewish Christians. This was, at least potentially, extremely serious, for it cut at the heart of the church's mission to both Jews and Gentiles. For this reason Paul makes no attempt here to present a comprehensive catechesis on Christian living. His concentration is on love, with its implications of respecting and welcoming others with their differences, on not judging and on humility. It includes the obligation to live in society as a good and respected citizen.

**<sup>1</sup>I appeal to you  
therefore, brothers  
and sisters,  
by the mercies of  
God,  
to present your  
bodies as a living  
sacrifice,  
holy and accept-  
able to God,  
which is your ap-  
propriate [NRSV  
'spiritual'] wor-  
ship.  
<sup>2</sup>Do not be con-  
formed to this  
world,  
but be trans-  
formed by the  
renewing of your  
minds,  
so that you may  
discern what is  
the will of God  
– what is good  
and acceptable  
and perfect.**

This is the first time in Romans that we have met the word 'appeal' (Greek: *parakaleō*, see commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:12). It is sometimes translated 'beseech', sometimes 'exhort', sometimes 'encourage', and sometimes 'comfort'. Each nuance has value for its root is the word 'call' (*kaleō*). Christ is called a *paraklētos* in John 14:16; 1 John 2:1. The call of the risen Christ is made through his Spirit (also called a *paraklētos* in John 14:16,26; 15:26), and mediated through Paul's words. The word *parakaleō* is Paul's usual word for moral exhortation, and includes his consciousness of being an apostle of the risen Christ, inviting the readers to live the life to which Christ is calling them.

Christian morality is only possible because of the new perception, the new mind, the new Spirit which we have from Christ. It flows from a sense of awe and wonder before the amazing love of God and the call he offers to be what God designs us to be. It is what happens when our lives, our living bodies, our feelings, thoughts, intentions and decisions flow from a heart that draws on grace and respects the sacred. It is the fruit of consecration to God.

Paul makes his appeal 'by the mercies of God'. He has been focusing in the first eleven chapters of this letter on 'God who shows mercy' (9:16), on the one whom he calls in another letter: 'the Father of mercies' (2 Corinthians 1:3). Earlier he wrote: 'Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life' (6:13). The verb 'present' (*paristēmi*) is borrowed from the Jewish cult where it was used for bringing an offering into the presence of God. Paul repeats it here, appealing to the Christians in Rome to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice.

As explained in commenting on 1 Corinthians 6:15, the word 'body' refers to the human person in all the different ways in which we live and relate in the actual circumstances of our daily life in this world. Christian morality is about having good thoughts and good intentions and a pure heart – but it is about these as they influence action and find expression in the way in which we relate in the world. Paul is asking them to sacrifice themselves, that is, to present themselves to God so that God can make them holy and so achieve his purposes through them. As Hosea said centuries earlier, the kind of sacrifice desired by God is the intimate communion with God that is meant by 'knowledge of God', and is expressed in 'steadfast love' (see Hosea 6:6).

Paul describes this kind of worship (*latreia*) as ‘appropriate’ (*logikos*) - a favourite word in the Stoic vocabulary for describing behaviour. For Paul, however, it is not a matter of logical deduction from intelligently observed nature. Rather it is a matter of sensitively following the leading of the Spirit of Christ. This is consistent with the teaching of the prophets who insisted that true worship must be expressed through obedience to God’s will.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

– Amos 5:21-24

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings ... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:10,16-17

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

– Isaiah 58:6-7

In calling this obedience ‘appropriate’, Paul is making the point that such behaviour is consistent with a rational understanding of reality, and explicitly the reality of God as revealed in Christ. Living in this way, we take our proper place in the divine design which Paul has been describing in this letter.

Living Jesus’ life means resisting the pressure to fit in with the behaviour that is fashionable in the world that is not open to the Spirit: ‘this present evil age’ (Galatians 1:4). ‘For the present form of this world is passing away’ (1Corinthians 7:31). Rather, we are to be transformed into Christ. We are reminded of Paul’s description of the Christian in a previous letter:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

A transformation is needed if we are to have ‘the mind of Christ’ (1Corinthians 2:16). This is not something which we can do by our own will or effort, though cooperation with grace is necessary. Paul therefore reminds them of the need to ‘be transformed by the renewing of your minds’ – a renewal that can be brought about only by the risen Christ through the gift of his Spirit. Only in this way will we be able to discern the will of God, what is truly good, what is truly pleasing to God, and what will truly bring our life to its perfect completion as willed by God.

**<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.**

**<sup>4</sup>For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,**

**<sup>5</sup>so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.**

**<sup>6</sup>We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:**

**prophecy, in proportion to faith;**

Paul speaks as an apostle (1:5; 11:13), recommending the virtue of ‘sober judgment’ (Greek: *sōphrosunē*, ‘moderation’), a virtue highly regarded in the Greek world. For Paul, however, the measure goes beyond the human estimation of reason. It is the measure of ‘faith’: one’s openness to grace, which openness is itself a gift. Only by contemplating Jesus as God’s self-revelation can we come to a true self-estimation. In that contemplation we will see the most amazing dimension of ourselves – the fact that, along with everyone else, but in a unique way, we are loved by God.

Paul focuses on the organic harmony of the church in speaking of it as ‘one body in Christ’. For a reflection on the expression ‘in Christ’, see the commentary on 8:1-2. Behind this acknowledgment of community is the more profound truth that it is the same Spirit that gives life to Christ and to the church, which can therefore be called, in a real sense, his body. Joined to Christ, therefore, we are necessarily joined to each other.

Since our life in Christ is a gift of grace, our Christian commitment must be based on two convictions. The first is that each of us must be sensitive to the way in which we share in the life of Christ, the way in which we have been graced, the gift (‘charism’) which we have from the Spirit. We must be sensitive to this gift and live it in faith. The second is that, since we each belong to the one Lord, and so belong to each other as members of his body (see 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12-27), we must be sensitive to the gifts of the others in the community.

The two foundational gifts of Christ to the church are those exercised by the apostles and the prophets (see 1 Corinthians 12:28). The apostles are our link with the historical Jesus; the prophets are our link with the risen and exalted Christ. The apostles ensure fidelity to tradition; the prophets ensure fidelity to the surprise of a revelation that is ever new.

Paul lists here seven ‘gifts’ (charisma), beginning with prophecy. For a reflection on the nature of this gift, see the commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:1. It is a prayer-gift, a gift of enlightenment by God, which gives insight into the mystery of who God is and of what God wills, together with the gift to be able to communicate this insight to others. To say that it is ‘in proportion to faith’, is to say that the measure of this gift is the measure of one’s openness to grace and to welcoming of the Spirit. Paul may also be affirming the need for discernment, that the present word, claiming to come from the Spirit of Christ, truly does so and does not contradict the ‘faith’, in the sense of the apostolic tradition.

Prophecy' is a charism that is concerned with the word. 'Ministry' (*diakonia*) is concerned with action. As explained in the commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:5, it is a sharing in the mission of Christ, the Servant of God. Christ carried out the will of his Father by giving his life in service to others. Paul asks those with a special grace of ministry to do the same.

Paul's final five examples focus on the person with the charism, rather than on the charism itself. 'The teacher' (compare 1 Corinthians 12:28-29) is to exercise his/her gift in helping people to come to an understanding of the meaning of the gospel and its implications for their lives.

One who has the gift of 'exhorting' (a gift which Paul himself is exercising in this present section, see 12:1) is to be an instrument of Christ, conveying to others Christ's appeal to live his life in accordance with the teaching they have received.

'The one who shares' is to do so 'in single-mindedness'. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote:

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

– 1 Thessalonians 2:8

In the introduction to this present letter we find:

I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.

– Romans 1:11

When they are sharing anything with others - a spiritual gift, knowledge, love, practical help - they are to do so simply because they are moved by the Spirit of Christ, and not for any ulterior motive.

A leader (see 1 Thessalonians 5:12) is to lead efficiently and conscientiously (see 2 Corinthians 8:7,8,16).

Finally, when Christians are instruments of God's mercy to others, reaching them in practical ways, they are to do so in the joy of the Holy Spirit (compare 2 Corinthians 9:7).

<sup>7</sup>ministry,  
in ministering;

the teacher,  
in teaching;

<sup>8</sup>the exhorter,  
in exhortation;

The one who shares,  
in single-mindedness;

[NRSV 'the giver,  
in generosity']

the leader,  
in diligence;

the compassionate,  
in cheerfulness.

**<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine;**

**hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;**

**<sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection;**

**outdo one another in showing honour.**

**<sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in the Spirit [NRSV 'in spirit'],**

**serve the Lord.**

**<sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope,**

**be patient in suffering,**

Paul begins his statement on the moral life of one who is 'ardent in the Spirit' to 'serve the Lord'. For the reasons suggested in introducing this section, he begins by speaking of 'love' (*agapē*). Up to this point he has spoken a number of times of God's love, and once of our love for God (8:28). Now he speaks of the sharing in God's love which we are given as a gift from Christ so that we can love one another with his love. Our love for one another is to be 'genuine' (*anupokritos*; see also 2Corinthians 6:6). There are echoes here of Jesus' accusation levelled at the Pharisees: 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you *hypocrites*, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me"' (Mark 7:6).

Paul goes on to describe love as hating what is evil and holding fast to what is good. Love is first and foremost concerned with commitment. It consists in rejecting (that is to say, 'hating', 'not-loving', 'refusing to be committed to') what is evil, and doing what is good. Paul immediately focuses on the brotherly and sisterly love (*philadelphia*) which members of the Christian family are to have for each other. It is to be characterised by affection (*philostorgos*), and by the way in which members of the community honour one another. We recall his words:

Concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another

– 1Thessalonians 5:9

The word translated here as 'zeal' (*spoudē*) is used by Paul a number of times in Second Corinthians. It denotes that quality whereby a person knows what he/she is doing and does it in a practical and efficient way. Paul is concerned that our mutual love be real. For it to be so we will need to be open to the fire of the Spirit. As he wrote to the Thessalonians: 'Do not quench the Spirit' (1Thessalonians 5:19). If we 'serve the Lord', it will be the love and the affection of the heart of Jesus that we are showing each other.

Paul has already spoken of hope (see 5:2-5; 8:20-25). There is joy in knowing what God has in store for us and in confidently leaving the future in God's hands while we focus now on doing God's will. Linked with hope is patience (see 8:25), needed if we are to remain loving when the burdens of life weigh heavily upon us. Suffering and difficulties are part of every person's life. Jesus is our model in bearing patiently the cross of daily living.

The key to living a moral life is perseverance in prayer, for a moral life is the overflow of the communion in love which is the gift of the risen Jesus to us. It is in prayer that we open our hearts to receive this gift. Paul is echoing his appeal to the Thessalonians: ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The Greek word translated here as ‘contribute’ is *koinōneō*. Recognising all that they have in common, Paul appeals to them to be generous. Towards the end of the letter he shares his plans with them. They include that fact that he is ‘going to Jerusalem to minister (*koinōneō*) to the saints’ (15:25). Some suggest a link between these two passages. The Christians in Rome may have heard of the collection which Paul is organising, and, knowing their close connections with Jerusalem, he may be extending an invitation to them to contribute.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the people are constantly being reminded of the fact that they once were exiles and slaves in Egypt. They must practice hospitality to strangers. All that Paul has said of God’s universal will to reach out to all, Jew and Gentile alike, supports Paul’s exhortation to the Roman community to exercise a virtue that would have often been called upon in a city that experienced a constant flow of ‘strangers’.

To bless others is to pray and work that they might inherit the promises of God. Paul’s words (see also 1 Corinthians 4:12) echo those of Jesus:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

—Luke 6:27-28

He appeals to them to be empathetic: feeling with others in their joys and in their sorrows. He calls on them to have a common mind (*phroneō*, as in 2 Corinthians 13:11). He repeats here his earlier exhortation: ‘do not become proud, but stand in awe’ (11:20). Associating with the lowly is an aspect of the virtue of humility, a virtue dear to the heart of him who said: ‘learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart’ (Matthew 11:29). In the context of this appeal for humility, Paul repeats a phrase from the Book of Proverbs: ‘Do not be wise in your own eyes’ (Proverbs 3:7; see Romans 11:25). As will emerge, certain of the Gentile members of the community are too sure of themselves and too ready to dismiss members of the community whom they consider to be weak in faith.

**persevere in prayer.**

**<sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.**

**<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**

**<sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.**

**<sup>16</sup>Have a common mind [NRSV ‘Live in harmony with one another];**

**do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;**

**do not claim to be wiser than you are.**

**<sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil,  
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.**

**<sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**

**<sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord' (Deuteronomy 32:35).**

**<sup>20</sup>No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'**

(Proverbs 25:21-22)

**<sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

We recall Paul's words to the Thessalonians:

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

– 1Thessalonians 5:15

The word translated 'noble' here is the Greek *kalos*, a favourite word among the Greek moralists. Behaviour that is *kalos*, is behaviour that fits with the 'beauty' of form in which true virtue consists. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

We intend to do what is right (*kalos*) not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others.

– 2Corinthians 8:21

Paul regularly wishes his readers 'peace' in the opening address of his letters (1:7). He exhorted the Thessalonians: 'Be at peace among yourselves' (1Thessalonians 5:17), and to the Corinthians he wrote: 'live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you' (2Corinthians 13:11). His exhortation here to the Romans is all-embracing.

They are not to avenge themselves. Justice will be done, but this must be left to the Lord who alone sees the truth in all its complexity. On the subject of divine wrath, we refer the reader to the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10. Paul dealt with this subject in the early part of this letter (see 1:18).

We are to continue loving even when we are treated badly. The Stoics taught this, for to behave otherwise is to lose one's peace of soul and to give to others control over one's soul. Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus (see Luke 6:27, 35), for those who treat us badly are still those 'for whom Christ died' (1Corinthians 8:11) – a phrase that Paul will repeat later in the letter (14:15). Will Jesus not say to us: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink' (Matthew 25:35)?

Paul is actually quoting from the Book of Proverbs. The conclusion about the burning coals seems to express the hope that a love-response will make one's enemies ashamed of their behaviour, and so lead them to repentance. Evil is to be opposed and overcome. This is possible, however, only by doing good.

Paul has just said: ‘If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all’ (12:18). Tension had been building up between the Jews in Palestine and the occupying Roman authority. At times agitation spread to other centres as well. Against this background, and in view of the fact that Paul is writing to the community in the capital of the Empire, we are not surprised to find him turning his attention to the kind of relations expected of disciples of Jesus towards civil authority. He is concerned that the Jews in Rome not get caught up in the conflicts that were growing in Palestine.

Throughout this passage, Paul focuses on the delegated nature of civil authority. His words cannot be used to support a position that demands obedience of any and every decision of government. On the contrary, he is speaking on the assumption that ‘rulers are not a terror to good conduct’. Paul is not making a general statement that all government is necessarily like this; nor is he passing a practical judgment on conditions in Rome, though Nero’s first five years as emperor were in fact quite promising. He had not yet shown any hostility to Christians and the generally dissolute behaviour for which he became renowned was to become evident only later.

Paul is stating that there is nothing in Christianity which demands, on principle, that one be anti-government. On the contrary, on the generous assumption that government is legitimate, in a justly-ordered state civil authority is from God, and Christians are to be subject to it. His teaching is traditional. We recall the instructions given to the exiles in Babylon:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

– Jeremiah 29:7

Nothing Paul writes here is to be understood as taking away the right and duty to resist if and when civil authority acts against God’s will. His own death surely witnesses to this.

**<sup>1</sup>Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.**

**<sup>3</sup>For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; <sup>4</sup>for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.**

**<sup>5</sup>Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup>Pay to all what is due them –taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.**

**<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.**

**<sup>9</sup>The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet' (Exodus 20:13-17) and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'**

(Leviticus 19:18).

**<sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.**

Having just spoken about what is 'due' by way of obligations towards civil authority (13:7), Paul stresses again the most fundamental Christian obligation: that of love. Earlier he wrote: 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good'(12:9). Thinking of relations within the community, he went on to say: 'love one another with mutual affection'(12:10). As he now states, this love is to reach out to everyone.

Earlier when speaking of faith he wrote: 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law'(3:31). A Christian who lives a life of faith that bears fruit in love (see Galatians 5:6) is living in obedience to God – which was the whole aim of the law. As Paul said earlier, God sent his Son 'so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'(8:4).

Echoing Jesus (see Mark 12:31), Paul quotes Leviticus. He sees it as summing up the commandments of the decalogue that refer to one's neighbour. We find the same teaching in his Letter to the Galatians: 'The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"'(Galatians 5:14). Rabbi Hillel, one of the leading Rabbis in Jerusalem during Jesus' boyhood, would agree with Paul's summary of the law. He is quoted as saying: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Law, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.' The great Rabbi Akiba (died 135AD) called the text from Leviticus 'the great summation of the law'.

Paul sees Christ as the goal towards which the law was aiming (10:4). Jesus fulfilled the law by the perfection of his faith and his loving obedience to God. United to Christ, 'nothing can separate us from God's love'(8:39). It is this divine love, 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(5:5), that is to flow through us to all those whom God loves and 'for whom Christ died' (14:15).

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses his conviction that with the death and resurrection of Jesus ‘the end of the ages has come’(1Corinthians 10:11). Christ has been raised as the first fruits of God’s harvest (1Corinthians 15:20). ‘The appointed time has grown short’(1Corinthians 7:29). The parousia is approaching when history will have run its course and those who are with Christ will share in the fullness of his eternal glory.

We are to be vigilant in what Paul calls ‘this present time’(3:26; 8:18; 11:5). The language in which Paul speaks of this vigilance is traditional. Recall his words to the Thessalonians in which he also speaks in terms of light versus darkness, and where he describes the armour which we are to wear:

You are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

– 1Thessalonians 5:5-8

Paul reminded the Galatians: ‘As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’ (Galatians 3:27). This is not a once for all action. It is to be repeated each day in our struggle against the desires of the flesh. As he said to the Galatians: ‘Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh’(Galatians 5:16; see the list of these desires in Galatians 5:19). To ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ is to ‘live in Christ’(see the commentary on 8:1-2).

**<sup>11</sup>Besides this, you know what hour it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.**

**For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;**

**<sup>12</sup>the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light;**

**<sup>13</sup>let us live honourably as in the day,**

**not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.**

**<sup>14</sup>Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,**

**and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.**

**<sup>1</sup>Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.**

One can only wonder at the power of Paul's mind, the passion of his faith and the delicacy of the love with which he has built up to the matter to which he now turns his attention. The problem which he addresses goes to the heart of the gospel and of the mission of the church in the world. Paul has spoken of God's design to bring all to salvation by drawing all into the community of faith of those who belong to Christ and who form the living temple of his Spirit. He had come to see in the self-giving in love of Jesus on the cross and in the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen Christ, God's way of fulfilling the promises and the hopes that inspired Judaism, and the longings of the Gentile world for salvation. The Roman empire had awakened in the hearts and minds of many a longing for peace and for a communion of peoples that had never been previously even imagined. Paul saw in the Christian church God's answer to this human longing and need to belong. The way to true peace was through communion in the love to which Jesus witnessed on the cross and which 'has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(5:5).

It was especially important that the Christian community in Rome witness to this communion in love and that it be, to Jews and to all the diverse nations of the empire, a sign of God's design to bring about a new world in which love would bind everyone together into the communion with God which was always God's intention. Yet there was in the community a strong majority, made up for the most part if not entirely of Gentile Christians, who were insisting on their point of view in matters that were not central to the faith, but only matters of 'opinion', and who were failing to welcome others whom they considered 'weak in faith'.

Paul has spoken particularly of love that transcends differences, and of humility. He is now ready to appeal to the members of the Roman community to recognise where they are failing in this regard and to change their behaviour. Their response will determine their place in contributing to the fulfilment of nothing less than God's providential design to bring about 'the salvation of everyone who believes, the Jew first and also the Greek' through the proclamation of the gospel and the building of community among those who believe.

The problem which Paul is addressing is one that continues to arise. The sins which he names continue to interfere with the mission of the church. We all have much to learn from the wisdom of Paul's appeal.

Paul's first example concerns eating meat. Some of the community felt free to eat any kind of meat, and they considered 'weak in faith' those who expressed scruples in the matter. While this latter group may have included converts from the Pythagorean school, which inculcated strict vegetarianism, it probably consisted mainly of Jewish Christians who continued to observe the regulations of the Torah in regard to not eating certain foods, and so avoided eating meat purchased at the market or offered them in a home.

Paul tackled this problem very thoroughly in his first letter to the Corinthians (see 1Corinthians 8-10). His words here are briefer but quite as profound. As he has just said, there is room for differences of opinion in matters that are not essential to the faith. The problem is not that some are eating certain foods while others are not. It lies, rather, with those who are breaking the bond of communion by looking down on certain members of the community as being weak in faith because they observe these regulations. They are doing in reverse what the Judaizing Christian missionaries were doing in Galatia. They are, in effect, saying that to be saved you have to stop living as a Jew and live like a Gentile.

Challenged in this way, and reacting against being made to feel like second-class Christians, some of the Jewish Christians have accused the Gentiles of failing to follow the law of God concerning 'righteous Gentiles', commands which had been affirmed also by the Assembly of Jerusalem and which required certain behaviour of Gentiles who shared table fellowship with Jews (see Acts 15:29). It is likely that the dispute was having an impact also on the wider Jewish community and was creating an impediment to their acceptance of the gospel.

Paul knows that the solution to the problem is not going to be found at the level of regulations. It can be found only through loving respect of the different groups for each other with their differences. They must stop passing judgment on each other. This is to be left to God. In the meantime, God has welcomed the different members with their differences. They must learn to do the same, in love. In verse four the 'you' is in the singular. Paul is engaging each of his listeners personally in the argument.

**<sup>2</sup>Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.**

**<sup>3</sup>Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.**

**<sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.**

We are the Lord's

**<sup>5</sup>Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike.**

**Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. <sup>6</sup>Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.**

**<sup>7</sup>We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.**

**<sup>8</sup>If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.**

**<sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.**

**<sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.**

**<sup>11</sup>For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God'(Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23).**

**<sup>12</sup>So then, each of us will be accountable to God.**

The second example refers to the practice of celebrating certain days: the Sabbath, for example, or certain traditional fast days. Paul spoke very strongly about this to the Galatians (4:10), for there it was a symbol of a way of life which they were in process of adopting, and it involved turning their back on the gospel. Here, the problem is rather that Gentile Christians are failing to respect behaviour that is important to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Paul's approach is therefore quite different. He asks everyone in the community to look at why certain ones keep certain days. It is the motivation that is important. What matters is that they are doing it because of the Lord. As he wrote to the Corinthians:

The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

– 2Corinthians 5:14-15

What matters is belonging to the Lord and giving 'unhindered devotion to the Lord'(1Corinthians 7:35). If their attention is on the Lord, they will not be living for themselves, but for him. This will be demonstrated by the way they respect others, with their differences.

Once again, Paul reminds them that the only important judgment is that before God. They should refrain from standing in judgment over each other on matters of 'opinion'(14:1) which do not touch the essence of the faith. Did not Jesus say: 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged' (Matthew 7:1)? Differences are to be respected and people are to be welcomed as they are.

Paul is concerned because of the possibility of putting a ‘stumbling block’ (Greek: *proskomma*) or a ‘hindrance’ (*skandalon*, ‘scandal’) in someone’s way. The second of these expressions is the one used by Judith when she refused to eat the food placed before her (Judith 12:2). It is a question of obedience to God and not behaving in a way that disregards God’s will and separates one, therefore, from communion with God. We recall the words of Jesus:

If any of you put a stumbling block (*skandalon*) before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

– Matthew 18:6.

We should be very sensitive to the consciences of others and not bring pressure upon them that could cause them to sin. Paul made the same point to the Corinthians: ‘take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block (*proskomma*) to the weak’ (1Corinthians 8:9).

Speaking from his communion with the risen Christ, Paul shares with them his conviction that things are not ‘unclean’ in themselves. His use of the Greek *koinos* in verse fourteen in its specifically Jewish sense of ritually unclean is one of the reasons for thinking that the problem to which Paul is referring involves Jewish Christians and the food regulations which they were accustomed to following in obedience to the law. Similarly his use of *katharos* for ritually clean in verse twenty, and his reference to the ‘circumcised’ in 15:8. Paul’s statement here echoes Mark’s comment on a statement made by Jesus:

There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile ... (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

– Mark 7:15,19

However, when it comes to human decisions, more is involved than the objective dimension of the way things are. Perception and motivation are essential dimensions of human moral behaviour. So, even though ‘nothing is unclean in itself’, it can be unclean for a person to act in a certain way if he/she does so in bad conscience. What matters in a Christian community is that we ‘walk in love’, recognising in others whose perception is different from our own ‘one for whom Christ died’. Paul uses the same argument and the same expression in 1Corinthians 8:11.

**<sup>13</sup>Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.**

**<sup>14</sup>I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself;**

**but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.**

**<sup>15</sup>If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.**

**Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.**

**<sup>16</sup>So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.**

**<sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit;**

**<sup>18</sup>The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.**

**<sup>19</sup>Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.**

**<sup>20</sup>Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat;**

**<sup>21</sup>it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.**

**<sup>22</sup>The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.**

**<sup>23</sup>But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.**

The danger is that, for whatever motive, people may be persuaded to follow the example of others even though it means going against their conscience. A person's judgment, as in the case of the dominant majority in the community, may be objectively correct, and so good. There is, in fact, nothing wrong with eating certain foods. However, if, through lack of love, we act without regard to the conscience of others and become the occasion of their sinning, it will be seen that our judgment was, considered as a whole, bad. If we are interested in objective truth, the ultimate objective truth is that God is love. A judgment that lacks love lacks truth.

In Christ they have found freedom from restrictive regulations in areas that are in themselves of no moral consequence. They must realise that this freedom is in order that they might be more sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who is working to bring about the 'kingdom of God' (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:12). As Paul wrote to the Galatians: 'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13). The signs of the working of the Spirit of the risen Christ are given as 'righteousness and peace and joy' (for a fuller list, see Galatians 5:22-23).

It is correct to apply one's faith intelligently, and to be confidently free from scruples. But we must recognise that not everyone has this strength, and that for some to behave in certain ways does put them in bad conscience. Paul is not asking them to waver in their faith. He is asking them to be sensitive to other people's consciences.

The profound wisdom of this passage, and Paul's conviction of the fundamental importance of love, invite us to reflect deeply and prayerfully on the way we behave in community. Paul speaks to the Galatians of 'the only thing that counts'. He does not go on to speak of the degree of objective truth that is found in our opinions, important though this obviously is. Rather, he speaks of 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). If we act from any other basis than our faith in what God is offering us in Jesus, we will find ourselves slipping back into sin, into the kind of behaviour that Paul described in the first section of this letter, or again in chapter seven.

Christ has freed us from this, let us open wide our hearts to the love that is being poured in by the Holy Spirit, and let us let this love flow out to all. This is Paul's appeal.

How often we lack the wisdom to discern properly. The people to whom Paul is writing thought, no doubt, that they were justified in 'passing judgment on one another'(14:13). One group looked down on the other for being so narrow-minded that they refused to eat meat, or needed to cling to certain practices judged by the 'enlightened group' to be of no importance. The other group condemned those who ate meat or failed to observe certain days. Both groups were wrong in that they missed two things: the first was that the matters over which they differed were not essential: they were disputing over matters of opinion (14:1); the second was that, in their keenness to uphold 'the truth', they were neglecting love (14:15).

We fall into this same mistake. We sometimes fancy we know too much. We may even think we can define God. We take up positions in defence of 'the truth', when often it is our own limited horizon that we are defending. As Jesus said:

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition ... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!

– Mark 7:8-9

The truth does need defending. Paul's letters witness to his attempt to do precisely that. Ideas are not all equally true, and it matters what we think, say or write. But attempts to defend the truth that bypass the processes of justice and love cannot claim the support of the gospel. 'The truth' of which Paul frequently speaks is the revelation of God's love in Christ. As we pursue the truth and attempt to discern insights from oversights and rise to higher viewpoints, let us do so always 'walking in love'(14:15).

In chapter fourteen Paul has given us a model for working through many problems that can exist in a Christian community. First of all he has some words to say to those who might consider themselves more broad-minded or better educated. Such people experience a certain freedom not to be so culturally-bound, to recognise the possibilities of thinking and behaving in unaccustomed ways, and to see that certain religious customs have only relative value. Paul admonished them not to look down on or 'despise'(14:3,10) others, described here as being 'weak', who find offensive certain practices and ways of thinking, and are locked into other practices judged by the 'broad-minded' to be unnecessary and perhaps superstitious.

Paul also has words to say to the second group. He admonishes them not to judge the more 'liberal' members.

Paul makes the point that God is big enough to 'welcome both'(14:3). Christ died for both (14:15). Certain things are simply matters of 'opinion'(14:1). What matters is 'giving honour to the Lord'(14:6), and 'walking in love'(14:15). All must avoid destroying 'the work of God'(14:20). Discernment remains an obligation for all (14:13), but passing judgment is to be left to God (14:10-11).

**<sup>1</sup>We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.**

**<sup>2</sup>Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour.**

**<sup>3</sup>For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me' (Psalm 69:9).**

**<sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.**

**<sup>5</sup>May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus,**

**<sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Because Paul agrees that the food regulations are not in themselves essential to obedience to God, he identifies with the 'strong'. In doing so, however, he makes the point that if they really are 'strong' they should be able to endure patiently the burden placed upon them by the 'weak', and to help the 'weak' to carry their burden. As he said elsewhere: 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). We have the example of Jesus who 'took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matthew 8:17).

Paul is keen to 'build up the church' (1Corinthians 14:12). He is clear on how this is to be done: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (1Corinthians 10:24). He adds: 'just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1Corinthians 10:33 - 11:1). He wants to see the community built up for its internal harmony and for its mission to the wider community. He therefore appeals to those who are able that they reach out to the weak in love with a view to making them stronger and more able to contribute to the community's life and mission. As he wrote earlier: 'Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding' (14:19). This is a constant theme in Paul's letters. He made the same appeal to the Thessalonians: 'encourage one another and build up each other' (1Thessalonians 5:11).

Our model in this is Christ who patiently bore the sinful actions of others and who continued to give himself to them in love. As Paul said to the Corinthians: 'you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2Corinthians 8:9).

Paul finds in the psalm a reference to Jesus, and invites the Roman community to contemplate Jesus in the light of the sacred scriptures. This will aid them in finding meaning not only in the sufferings of Jesus but also in their own. He speaks again of the connection between patiently endured suffering and hope. As he wrote earlier: 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope' (5:3-4).

He has already appealed to them to 'live in harmony with one another'(12:16). Here he recognises such harmony as a grace, but one that is desired for them by Jesus 'who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us'(8:34). Paul prays, as he prayed for the Corinthians, that they 'live in peace'(2Corinthians 13:11), and that this harmony find expression in their communal prayer of praise.

**<sup>7</sup>Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.**

**<sup>8</sup>For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,**

**<sup>9</sup>and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name' (Psalm 18:49);**

**<sup>10</sup>and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people' (Deuteronomy 32:43);**

**<sup>11</sup>and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him' (Psalm 117:1);**

**<sup>12</sup>and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.'**

(Isaiah 11:10)

**<sup>13</sup>May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

When appealing earlier to the 'strong' to welcome the 'weak', Paul reminded them that 'God has welcomed them' (14:3). They know this because of the welcome given to them by Christ. Paul reminds them of this here. They are to welcome one another 'for the glory of God': so that all will see God's power at work and will be caught up in wonder, admiration and praise.

Paul speaks of Christ as the 'servant' (*diakonos*) of the circumcised'. For the meaning of *diakonos*, see the commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:5. Jesus was sent by God to the Jews as God's ambassador, with God's authority and power. He revealed 'the truth (*alētheia*) of God'. That is to say he revealed who God really is: God's 'righteousness' and God's 'fidelity'.

In doing so, Christ brought about the fulfilment of 'the promises given to the patriarchs'. As Paul has already argued, these promises reached out beyond Judaism to embrace all the nations of the world. This was Paul's theme when he reflected upon Abraham in chapter four, a theme he developed in chapter eleven (especially 11:13-24). As God's 'servant', Christ revealed that God chose to express his mercy and to fulfil his promises in such a way that 'the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy'. Paul supports this statement with four texts: two from the Writings, one from the Torah and one from the Prophets, in this way spanning the whole of sacred scripture.

In the last of the quoted texts, Isaiah sees the Davidic king as the one who will rally all the nations to God's cause. Paul sees Christ as this Davidic Messiah. The love that binds Jew and Gentile together in the Christian community is the fulfilment of God's purpose as revealed in the sacred texts.

He concludes with a prayer that the Christians in Rome, both Jews and Gentiles, might experience their faith in such a way as to give them unlimited hope that they, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will all enjoy the destiny to which God is calling them.

Paul has completed his statement of the essential themes of the gospel which he has been commissioned to proclaim. In these verses he begins the concluding section of his letter. If we read these and the following verses alongside the Introduction (1:1-15), we will see that Paul reiterates the same themes. His statement here concerning his confidence in the goodness and in the knowledge of the Roman community reminds us of his earlier statement: 'I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world' (1:8). His acknowledging that he has been rather forthright in some of his statements reminds us of his talking about 'sharing with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine' (1:11-12). He added that he was eager 'to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome' (1:15).

Here and in the following verses he speaks of the 'gospel' (see also 15:19,20) – a word that kept recurring in the Introduction (see 1:1,9,15,16). Here and in the following verses he speaks of his apostolic commission (see also 15:18,27). We recall that he introduced himself as 'called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God' (1:1), and added: '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' (1:5-6; see also 1:13).

Of special interest is Paul's definition of the nature of 'the grace given me by God' in verse sixteen. It is full of terms which have cultic connotations. Paul calls himself 'a minister (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, in the priestly service (*hierourgeō*) of the gospel of God, so that the offering (*prosphora*) of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified (*hagiazō*) by the Holy Spirit.' Paul is filling out what he meant when he wrote in the Introduction that by 'announcing the gospel of God's Son', he was 'worshipping (*latreuō*) God with my spirit' (1:9).

Like the priests of the Jewish cult, for whom the word 'leitourgos' is reserved in the Greek Bible (see Exodus 28:35,43; 29:30), Paul is offering sacrifices to God. Earlier he urged the Roman community: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice (*thusia*), holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (*latreia*)' (12:1). Paul's ministry calls him to be a priest in this community, and they are his offering. He sees his ministry of preaching the gospel as an act of divine service in the temple which is the church.

**<sup>14</sup>I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.**

**<sup>15</sup>Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God**

**<sup>16</sup>to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>17</sup>In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God.**

**<sup>18</sup>For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, <sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God,**

**so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.**

**<sup>20</sup>Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, <sup>21</sup>but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand'(Isaiah 52:15).**

**<sup>22</sup>This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.**

**<sup>23</sup>But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you <sup>24</sup>when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.**

In his introduction Paul said: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God'(1:16). As he looks back over the years of his ministry in the eastern Mediterranean, he has every reason to delight in what he calls 'my work for God'. He takes no glory to himself. He knows that it is 'what Christ has accomplished through me ... by the power of the Holy Spirit'. He repeats what he said in the Introduction about the aim of his ministry. It is 'to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles'(1:5).

We have here one of the rare occasions on which Paul speaks of the 'signs and wonders' that the Spirit of God has worked through him. Another was in a previous letter written from Macedonia or Illyricum to Corinth in which he reminds the Corinthians that: 'the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works'(2Corinthians 12:12; compare 1Thessalonians 1:5). Luke records the miraculous healing of the crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:10), and the miraculous liberation of the slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:18). Luke also tells us that 'God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them'(Acts 19:11-12). The greatest sign and the greatest source of wonder is, of course, the gospel itself 'the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes'(1:16; compare 1Corinthians 2:4).

Paul mentions the wide sweep of his apostolic work and makes two points. The first is that he understands his mission as being that of a pioneer (compare 2Corinthians 10:14-16). He supports his understanding with a text from Isaiah. The second is that he has completed his mission in the East and plans now to go to Spain via Rome. He mentioned in his Introduction that he was praying 'that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you' (1:10). He looks forward to their company, their prayer and their support as he ventures out to the western fringes of the empire.

Paul has a lot to say about the collection for Jerusalem in his Corinthian correspondence (see 1Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2Corinthians 8-9). Here he speaks of it in the same terms as a work of ‘ministering (*diakoneō*) to the saints’. It is something which he is doing under the direction of the risen Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he was not sure that he would need to take the collection to Jerusalem himself (see 1Corinthians 16:4). He now knows that he must go. Using the image of stamping with a seal, he tells them that he needs to ensure that the Jerusalem community knows that this monetary assistance is a sign from the Gentile churches of their solidarity with their Jewish brothers and sisters in their need. It is clear from Paul’s words here that he sees the collection as one way in which he can help to bind his churches to the mother church in Judea, and to show the Jewish Christians that his mission to the Gentiles does not imply a break with them, as some were saying.

Paul is clearly anxious about his impending journey to Jerusalem, and with good reason, as we discover from Luke’s account of what happened there. He knows of the close connections between the Roman church and the church in Jerusalem, and he is hoping that the Roman community may pray for the success of his mission, and that perhaps they may be in a position to exert some influence on his behalf.

The ‘unbelievers’ about whom he is concerned are probably two groups. There are the Jews who see him as an apostate (see Acts 14:2; 20:19). There are also certain Jewish Christians who have been against him from the beginning, claiming that his gospel is defective because of his failure to insist on full obedience to the law. In Luke’s account of what happened to Paul in Jerusalem, the collection is mentioned almost as an aside (see Acts 24:17). He does not say whether his offering was rejected or accepted.

As in his introduction (see 1:10), so here, Paul shows his constant desire to do God’s will (compare Acts 18:21).

**<sup>25</sup>At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints;**

**<sup>26</sup>for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.**

**<sup>27</sup>They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.**

**<sup>28</sup>So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected [‘have sealed to them this fruit’], I will set out by way of you to Spain; <sup>29</sup>and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.**

**<sup>30</sup>I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup>that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, <sup>32</sup>so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.**

**<sup>33</sup>The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.**

**<sup>1</sup>I commend to you  
our sister Phoebe, a  
deacon of the church  
at Cenchreae,**

**<sup>2</sup>so that you may wel-  
come her in the Lord  
as is fitting for the  
saints, and help her  
in whatever she may  
require from you,**

**for she has been a  
benefactor of many  
and of myself as well.**

**<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aq-  
uila, who work with  
me in Christ Jesus,**

**<sup>4</sup>and who risked their  
necks for my life, to  
whom not only I give  
thanks, but also all  
the churches of the  
Gentiles.**

**<sup>5</sup>Greet also the church  
in their house.**

It is likely that Phoebe is the bearer of the letter. She is clearly a woman of means and is travelling to Rome on some business matter. She is from Cenchreae, nine kilometres to the southeast of Corinth, and its port on the Saronic Gulf, which opened into the Aegean and the east (see Acts 18:18). Paul is recommending her to the community in Rome and acknowledging the debt which he and the whole community owe her. Perhaps it was in her home that the Christian community in Cenchreae met for the Eucharist.

Paul refers to her as a ‘deacon’ (diakonos), indicating that she carries out a special ministry which the community acknowledges as being authorised and graced by the risen Christ (see the commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:5). He refers to her also as a ‘benefactor’: a person whose status in society enabled her to support others materially and in other ways in the public life of the city.

In verse three Paul begins to greet members of the Roman community. He greets twenty-four by name, beginning with Prisca and Aquila. This list of greetings helps explain some aspects of the present letter. While, as mentioned in the introduction, the community itself was not one that Paul had founded or visited, he had met and worked with, or had heard about and knew by name, a number of its members. He was not writing to the community as a complete stranger.

Prisca and Aquila were among those banished from Rome in 49AD by decree of the emperor Claudius. Paul met them the following year when he made his first visit to Corinth. Aquila was originally from Pontus and was a tentmaker like Paul. They ‘worked with’ Paul as tentmakers, but also in his Christian ministry (Acts 18:2-3). When Paul left Corinth in 52AD, they travelled with him to Ephesus, where they continued their ministry (see Acts 18:3). Writing to Corinth from Ephesus, Paul sends greetings from them ‘together with the church in their house’ (1 Corinthians 16:19). They are now back in Rome, having returned, perhaps, when the edict of Claudius terminated with his death in 54AD. Perhaps they did so with Paul’s encouragement, to help prepare the way for Paul’s own visit (see Acts 19:21). As in Corinth, so in Rome, they are offering hospitality to the community in their house. Because they were Jews, such a gathering was permitted under Roman law.

The long list of people greeted by Paul include men and women. Some of the names are Greek, others are Latin. Epänetus is identified as the 'first fruits (Greek: *aparchē*) in Asia for Christ'. Mary could be a Jewish or a Latin name. She is clearly someone whose contribution to the life and mission of the Roman community is well known and appreciated.

Most ancient and modern interpreters take Junia to be a Latin female name. She may be the wife of Andronicus. Paul seems to be identifying them as Jews (see 9:3). Along with Paul, they have experienced being in prison. It is not clear that 'with me' means that they shared one of Paul's imprisonments. It is also not clear whether Paul is saying that they were held in high esteem by the apostles, or *as* apostles. The latter seems more likely, in which case Paul is probably using the term, as elsewhere, for those commissioned by Christ through a local church as itinerant missionaries (compare 1 Corinthians 9:5; 12:28; 2 Corinthians 8:23; 11:13; see also Acts 13:3; 14:4,14). The close connections between the church in Jerusalem and the church in Rome, and the fact that they were Christians prior to Paul, suggests that they may have come from Jerusalem.

Paul greets the Christians in the household of Aristobulus. He may be referring to the brother of Herod Agrippa I and a friend and confidant of the emperor Claudius. If he brought Christian slaves with him to Rome this is another way in which Christianity could have come to the city. Herodion is identified as a Jewish Christian, possibly a former slave in the household of Herod. Claudius's secretary was called Narcissus. He was forced to suicide shortly after Claudius's death. It may be the slaves in his household that Paul is greeting.

The list of names here reminds us of the many people who, through their heroic lives and witness to Christ, were instrumental in the miraculous spread of the gospel in those early years.

**<sup>5b</sup>Greet my beloved Epänetus, who was the first convert ['first fruits'] in Asia for Christ.**

**<sup>6</sup>Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.**

**<sup>7</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.**

**<sup>8</sup>Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.**

**<sup>9</sup>Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.**

**<sup>10</sup>Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.**

**<sup>11</sup>Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.**

**<sup>12</sup>Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.**

**<sup>13</sup>Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother — a mother to me also.**

**<sup>14</sup>Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them.**

**<sup>15</sup>Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.**

**<sup>16</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.**

**<sup>17</sup>I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.**

**<sup>18</sup>For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.**

**<sup>19</sup>For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil.**

**<sup>20</sup>The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

**<sup>21</sup>Timothy, my co-worker, greets you;**

**so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.**

**<sup>22</sup>I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.**

**<sup>23</sup>Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.**

**Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>There is no verse 24 in the text accepted by Nestlé-Aland. Some ancient manuscripts include here: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.'

Paul thanked God earlier that the community in Rome was 'obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted' (6:17). However, there are some, as we have already heard, who are causing 'dissensions and offences' (Greek: *skandalon*; see 14:13). Some of these may be coming from outside the community.

Paul repeats his confidence in the Roman community, because of what he has heard about them (see 1:8; 15:14). His concern reminds us of the words of Jesus: 'be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16).

He sends greetings from Timothy. Jason is possibly the Jason who gave hospitality to Paul in Thessalonica (see Acts 17:5-9), and Sosipater is probably the delegate called Sopater from Beroea who is with Paul in Corinth to take the collection to Jerusalem (see Acts 20:4).

Tertius, who is Paul's secretary for the purpose of writing this letter, has a Latin name. Perhaps he is known to the Roman community and for that reason adds his own greeting. Paul then adds the names of two prominent leaders of the Corinthian church. The first is Gaius, his host, who was baptised by Paul (see 1 Corinthians 1:14). Either his home is used for the gatherings of the community, or any travelling Christian can expect a welcome there.

The second prominent figure in the Corinthian church is Erastus, the city treasurer who is also mentioned in Acts 19:22. An inscription from the middle of the first century has been discovered in Corinth naming a certain Erastus as having paved a square at his own expense when appointed to an official position in the city. It is quite likely that it is referring to the Erastus named here by Paul. Quartus is another whose Latin name may indicate links with the Roman community.

Because this doxology (16:25-27) appears after 15:33 in our oldest papyrus manuscript, and because it appears after 14:23 in other ancient manuscripts, it has been suggested that it may have been added to the letter at a later date, perhaps when Paul's letters were being compiled. However, most ancient manuscripts place it here and it is a fitting end to the letter, picking up important themes and ending in an act of praise of God's wisdom that echoes something of 11:33-36.

In his introduction Paul wrote: 'I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you'(1:11). Indeed, the gospel which Paul has been commissioned to proclaim ('my gospel', see 2:16) can strengthen them, for it 'the proclamation of Jesus Christ', and in two senses. It is about Jesus as the one in whom God has disclosed 'the mystery that was kept secret for long ages', namely, God's will to bring about the salvation of Jew and Gentile through Jesus. It is 'the proclamation of Jesus Christ' also because it is the risen Christ who is proclaiming the gospel through Paul.

Though the mystery has only now been disclosed, and is only now being proclaimed to the world, it is something that comes as the fulfilment of the revelation found in the prophetic writings of the Jewish scriptures. This is how Paul first introduced the gospel in the Introduction, where he spoke of it as 'the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures'(1:1-2). Later he referred to the gospel as 'attested by the law and the prophets'(3:21), and the letter is rich in quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. Through the commission given to Paul, the gospel 'is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God', and the purpose of the proclamation is 'to bring about the obedience of faith'(see 1:5).

It is to this God, the only God, the God of both Jews and Gentiles (see 3:29-30), the God of whom he wrote earlier: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!'(11:33) – it is to this God that Paul offers his homage of praise, as always, 'through Jesus Christ'.

<sup>25</sup>Now

**to God who is able to strengthen you**

**according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,**

**according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages**

<sup>26</sup>**but is now disclosed,**

**and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles,**

**according to the command of the eternal God,**

**to bring about the obedience of faith —**

<sup>27</sup>**to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.**

Reflections on Romans

1. Justification, righteousness, faith and salvation

The letter to the Romans is concerned with salvation (see commentary on 8:24). The gospel is ‘the power of God *for salvation* to everyone who has *faith*’(1:16). God has revealed in Jesus that God’s will is ‘to be merciful to all’(11:32). ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be *saved*’(10:13). That is to say, it is possible for every one, at the last judgment, to be declared righteous by God. What Jesus has done ‘leads to *justification* and life for all’(5:18). All can avoid condemnation (8:1), and receive ‘the free gift of God’, which is ‘eternal life’(6:23).

According to the gospel preached by Paul, God has chosen to do this by making people righteous now (5:9). It is God’s will ‘that there may be *righteousness* for everyone who *believes*’(10:4). God has chosen to release everyone from the dominion of sin (6:14), by giving us a share in the life enjoyed by his risen Son (see commentary on 8:1-2). In this way we are reconciled to him (5:10-11; 11:15), are at peace with him (5:1), and are able to enjoy living according to his will (8:4,7).

Paul insists that justification leading to salvation is a gift from God (3:24; 5:15-17). It cannot be earned or merited. The only response asked of us by God is the response of faith (1:16-17; 3:28), which is itself a gift, a sharing in the faith of Jesus (see commentary on 3:22). God’s offer of communion in love is something we are free to welcome (=faith) or reject (=unbelief). To believe is to allow God’s Spirit to produce in us the fruit of obedience to God’s will (1:5; 15:18; 16:26). It is the gift of the Spirit of Christ which makes it possible for us to respond (5:5; see commentary on 8:9). What is asked of us is faith in God as he has revealed himself and his will in Christ (1:16-17; 3:21-26).

A major problem Paul faced in preaching such a gospel came from Jews and their understanding of the law. While some, who lacked faith, hoped that they could achieve salvation through their own merits (9:32), such a hope is as much contrary to Judaism as it is to Christianity. Judaism acknowledges that justification and salvation are gifts from God and cannot be earned or merited. However, since Jews rightly accept the law as being a gift through which God revealed his will, some were unable to envisage the possibility of having a genuine faith in God without expressing this faith in total obedience to the law.

Paul’s argument is that justification is offered by God in love and is to be welcomed in faith. The law (which included becoming a circumcised Jew) is no longer the measure of obedience. People must obey God as he has revealed his will in Christ, and as he continues to reveal his will through the Spirit. Paul declares that justification is from God, and is to be received in faith ‘apart from the law’(3:21,28). This is especially obvious since justification is offered to non-Jews as well as to Jews (2:10; 3:20). God has done something new in Christ which has liberated the Jews from the limited horizon of the law. God does not want Gentiles to become Jews, nor does he want Jews to become Gentiles. He has offered them something which transcends the law: sharing in the life of his Son. God asks that we welcome in faith God’s gift of his own living Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ.

## 2. The universal scope of God's call to salvation

The key to Paul's insight is a rigorous monotheism and a profound conviction of the universality of God's merciful love and God's design to offer salvation to all. In his initial address, Paul speaks of the grace of apostleship which he has received 'to bring about the obedience of faith among *all* the Gentiles for the sake of his name' (1:5). In his conclusion he quotes from the scriptures to show that it has always been God's will that '*all* the peoples praise him'(15:11). When contrasting Christ with Adam, he writes: 'As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's righteous living leads to acquittal and life for *all*'(5:18). 'God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that he may be merciful to *all*'(11:32). God wills all to be saved because he is the God of *all* (3:29), 'For from him and through him and to him are *all* things. To him be the glory forever. Amen'(11:36).

This is not to say that in fact all will be saved. This must depend on our cooperation with grace: 'each of us will be accountable to God'(14:12). It is possible for anyone to refuse belief and therefore to suffer the consequences of sin: 'By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed'(2:5). 'There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek'(2:9). 'All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law'(2:12). Paul warns that it is not impossible for a believer to fall away from grace: 'You stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches (the Jews), perhaps he will not spare you (the Gentiles). Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to wards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off'(11:20-22). It is possible to 'cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died'(14:15).

It is central to Paul's gospel that those are justified 'who believe in him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (4:24-25). This is true for all who believe in him, Jew or Gentile, without distinction (3:22,30; 4:11,16; 10:4). Further, provided we continue in his kindness (11:22), provided we remain 'obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted'(6:17), all who are justified will be saved, Jew or Gentile without distinction (1:16; 8:1; 9:23-24; 10:11-13). To reject faith in Christ is to reject God's offer of salvation. But what about those who do not reject the offer, but simply fail to accept it because they do not know of it? This problem is raised by Paul as a possible excuse for the Jews. Paul rejects the excuse, claiming that they have in fact heard the gospel and have rejected it (10:18-21). The problem, however, remains for those individuals or groups who have not heard the gospel, or have heard it presented badly and have rejected, not Christ, but the false Christ presented to them. The principles on which an answer must be based are found in Paul's teaching on God being the God of all people, on the transcendence of divine mercy, and on the fact that there will be 'glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good'(2:10), including those who do the will of God as they find it 'written on their hearts'(2:15). Condemnation is only for those who sin 'without excuse'(1:20).

## The universal scope of God's call to salvation

This does not lessen the importance of the gospel. Paul has described the human condition without Christ (1:18-32). He has also described the difficulty of living a moral life, and the cry to be liberated from the dominion of sin, a cry which God has answered in Christ (7:24-25). Paul's urgency in his apostolic ministry, including his desire to go on to Spain, follows from his profound conviction of the importance of everyone hearing the good news of what God is making possible through Christ. Paul does not speculate as to how God, in his mercy, draws those to him who have not heard of Christ. He preaches and writes about what he does know concerning God's offer in Christ. Every person has the right and the need to hear the gospel.

This universal (catholic) dimension of Christianity was especially attractive in the Gentile world, for it showed a way to realise the finest and noblest aspirations of the philosophers of the day. The Stoics especially, who believed that everyone participated in the one divine fire that energises creation, encouraged a view of life that transcended state and cultural boundaries. The universalism of Christianity is consistent, too, with the roots and prophetic tradition of Judaism, as Paul pointed out in regard to Abraham (4:1-25), and in his quotations from the scriptures (especially Romans 15:9-12). It showed a way of realising the promises and fulfilling the law while removing the racial requirements that restricted the Jews in their mission to the world.

Religion that is sectarian makes no sense. We all share an ultimate yearning for meaning and for love. We all share religious experience. If there is meaning for one, there is meaning for all, for there is only one God and 'from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen'(11:36).

### 3. The place of the Jewish law in divine providence.

The place of the Jewish law in divine providence was an important theme in Paul's letter to the Galatians. His teaching here in Romans is consistent with all that we saw in the earlier letter. The main difference is that in Galatians he was facing the problem of a community that was in process of converting to Judaism. This forced Paul into highlighting the limitations of the law, as well as into stressing that to convert to Judaism would be to reject Christ. In Rome the problem was rather that Gentile Christians were failing to appreciate Judaism and their debt to it. Paul is concerned here to point out the positive qualities of the law, while still stating its limitations.

The law expresses the righteous requirements of God (1:32; 2:26; 8:4; see also 2:14,18). It is a gift from God (9:4); it is 'holy and just and good'(7:12); it is 'spiritual'(7:14). Its purpose is to name sin, and so to make clear people's need to change their behaviour and to seek for God's mercy (3:20; 5:20; 7:7). However, it cannot and does not break the power of sin (3:9). It does not justify people in God's sight (3:20). It is not the vehicle for the promise (4:13). It promises life (7:10), but, because it cannot break the dominion of sin (7:7-12), it does not give life (8:3). The law is upheld by Christ (3:31), to whom it looks forward (3:21), and who enables it to achieve its goal (10:4). The obedience which it asked of people by the law is now possible in the Christian community, for 'love is the fulfilling of the law'(13:10).

The gospel is that we belong to Christ. He has broken the dominion of sin. He has redeemed us from its slavery and has become our new lord. We can now live to God. Our total obedience now is to his Spirit dwelling in us: 'You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ... we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit' (7:4,6). The law has been transcended by God who has now revealed his righteousness in Christ, and given the gift which he promised to Abraham, the gift of the life of his Spirit – the Spirit of Christ.

#### 4. The appeal to experience, and religious realism in Romans

Paul is concerned about sin (1:18 - 2:5; 3:9-18; 7:5-25), and in speaking about it he appeals to the observation and inner experience of his readers. Paul is concerned to see a change in people's decisions and so in their relationships. The final section of his letter presents a sensitive, practical, comprehensive and demanding portrait of ways of living which would make an immense difference to our world if only we would heed what Paul says. Paul's gospel is not about speculation that is unrelated to daily living. It is about real people, and their real living, and about making a real difference to our world. A recurring insistence in this letter is that such a change is not only desirable, but possible. Paul is not presenting ideals that are attractive but unattainable. He is saying that changes can happen and ought to happen (6:4,6,13,19-22; 8:4).

The basis for his exhortations to live a better life is consciously religious. At its root, religious experience is the transcendent yearning for meaning and for love which is the driving force in all our lives (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:1-16). We can lose touch with religious experience, we can be distracted from it, we can twist and distort it. But when we are attentive to it, and stay in touch with it, and live responsibly in accordance with its movement, the result is living in communion with God.

Examining a letter from a distance of nearly two thousand years, we can expect little more than to find indications of religious experience in the ways in which ideas are expressed, and in the values that inform the writing. The members of the Roman community had the advantage of having people present among them who could fill out the words of the letter from their personal experience of Paul. But apart from that very important difference, we are close to those to whom the letter was addressed. For religious experience cannot be learned, it can only be recognised. We can learn its meaning. We can learn about the ways in which it is expressed. But to know that an experience is religious, we must attend to our own primary yearning and find an echo of it when we read.

Let us begin with Paul's central teaching. He understands himself to be a 'slave of Christ Jesus' (1:1). He thinks of Jesus as his 'lord'. This is at the heart of Christian self-understanding. What does it mean? Jesus had been crucified a quarter of a century before Paul was writing. What does it mean for Paul to belong to him, to be called by him, commissioned by him, loved by him? Paul answers these questions on three levels.

The first level is historical. Paul is concerned with the memory of those who lived with Jesus, who came to know him and learned to love him and to be loved by him. The extraordinary quality of Jesus' life is behind everything Paul writes. He draws attention to it explicitly when he writes of Jesus' righteous living and obedience being such as to make it possible for all to be righteous (5:18-19). Many memories from the life of Jesus stand behind such a statement. Paul also speaks of Jesus having a human nature like ours but not sinning (8:3). He says of Jesus that he did not please himself, but took on himself the anger that people had towards God (15:3). Apart from these general observations, Paul concentrates attention on Jesus' death (see 3:24-25; 4:25; 5:6-9; 6:10; 8:32; 14:15). Jesus' way of dying is a perfect symbol of all that Jesus was and stood for. He was not spared the consequences of human injustice. By God's will, his way of making a gift of his death, while believing in God and loving those with whom he had shared the good news of the kingdom, is a perfect revelation of who God is, and of the way God wishes to relate to us. It is also a perfect example of how we are to respond in faith to God's grace. Paul is concerned also with the experiences of those who had joined the Christian communities. He is writing to people who have been moved by the example of Jesus and have made a decision to live as Jesus lived. This faith found expression in baptism, whereby they have ritually expressed this decision. They pledged themselves to put to death their sinful behaviour (8:13), and to accept Jesus as their lord and master (7:4). They were welcomed into the community of Christ's disciples, and followed the teaching (6:17) and the example (6:3-14) of Jesus.

The second level is more mysterious. Paul frequently asserts that Jesus who died was raised by God to life-beyond-death (1:4; 4:25; 6:4,5,9-10; 7:4; 8:11,34; 10:9). The significance of the resurrection is that it demonstrates that the faith that Jesus put in his Father was not in vain. It demonstrates that God is as Jesus believed him to be. For Jesus it means that he has attained the goal of life, by sharing in the glory of God. For mankind it means that our hopes for eternity are secured. Fullness of life-beyond-death is possible for us, because we know that it has happened for Jesus. Therefore, if we live like him, we will share eternal life with him. It means, moreover, that our union with him is not simply a memory, it is not simply a matter of following his example. He lives and therefore we can now be in living union with him. Why did Paul believe that Jesus was alive and therefore had been raised by God from the dead? This basic question is not directly treated in this letter. We can only assume that Paul considered that his readers were well versed in the reasons, so that he had no need to dwell on them in his letter. However, the letter contains many indications that this was no gratuitous belief, for it followed from their personal and communal experience.

This takes us to the third level. In his first summary statement of the meaning of the Gospel, Paul wrote: 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (1:17). The third level is that of Christian experience. People experienced being alienated and lost (7:7-25). They experienced a change, and the ability not to be dominated by sin (8:3-5,13,15). They experienced a sanctifying Spirit (1:4; 6:19,22; 15:16), a new life (6:4; 7:6; 9:1; 12:2). They experienced being righteous-by-grace (3:26; 5:2,16), reconciled with God (5:11).

This experience engaged their deepest religious yearnings. It directed and empowered them. They recognized it as being from God and of God (8:9,11,14). The Spirit which moved them was a 'holy' Spirit (5:5; 9:1; 14:17; 15:13), given by God (5:5), and experienced in prayer (8:15-16, 26-27). It was an experience of faith (1:17; 3:2). It meant that they experienced love such as they had never known before (15:30) and joy (14:17), power (15:13,19) and peace (8:6). It meant also that they were filled with hope for their future union with God in the glory of eternal life (5:2,9,21; 6:8,22-23; 8:17-25; 15:4,13). This is summed up by Paul in the word 'grace': something which they now experienced 'much more' (5:15,17,20). This experience did not put them above the human condition, any more than it spared Jesus. They knew the 'sufferings of the present time' (8:18). They knew groaning and weakness. Unlike Jesus, they also knew moral failure. But they knew also that they were no longer under the bondage of sin, and that they could experience righteousness if they responded to the grace being offered to them.

Finally, in their experience this new divine energy was intimately associated with Jesus. Those who had never known Jesus were unable to make the connection between their present experience and Jesus of Nazareth. For this, they had to rely on the witness of those who had known Jesus before his death. The story of Jesus was told by people who had known Jesus personally and who claimed to be in communion with him still, and to be experiencing his living Spirit in their lives. And their claim was obviously convincing. Paul himself was not one of those who knew Jesus before his crucifixion, nor in this letter does he write of his relationships with those who did. But he does refer to some of his own experiences (15:18-19), and there were those in the Roman community who could vouch for them.

The proof of the resurrection lies in the lives of those who believed (7:4). It was the Spirit of Christ, the same Spirit that sustained him on the cross, the Spirit of love that bound him to God his Father, that was poured into their hearts (5:5) as they heard about him, contemplated his life, watched him revealing to them who God really is, listened to his teaching, and patterned their lives on his. It was his Spirit that set them free from the dominance of sin and death (8:2).

Every act of faith involves risk. But Paul is not arbitrarily asking of his readers an act of blind faith. He is asking them to believe precisely because of what they see and hear. He is appealing all the time to their lives, to the Spirit of life (8:2,6,10,11,13) that is powerfully sustaining them.

Religion that is not concerned with human experience, with an understanding of that experience, and with meanings and values that inform a way of living, is at best irrelevant. It is likely to be a major distraction. For what is divine revelation if it does not in some way involve the removal of the veil hiding the transcendent? Revelation brings an unfolding of insight into the mystery that is at the heart of all our questions and all our searching for meaning and for love.

## Experience and religious realism

Christianity, like Judaism before it, is a historical religion. To express its most profound insights, it relies on the facts of experience, the facts of history. Christianity, like Judaism, which is its root and stock (11:11-24), is concerned with the way to live in obedience to God. Like Judaism, it is based on religious experience, and on reflection on the meaning of history in the light of such experience. Christianity added to Judaism the experience of the Spirit of Christ which made righteousness possible. It added the assurance of salvation based on the knowledge that Jesus had been raised by God.

The gospel gave Jews like Paul a new energy to take up again, in a new way, the mission to the world given them by God. It did so in a way that made it possible for non-Jews to find the fulfilment of their own spiritual search and the energy to 'harness for God the energies of love' (Teilhard de Chardin), and so contribute to the building of 'a civilisation of love' (Pope Paul VI).