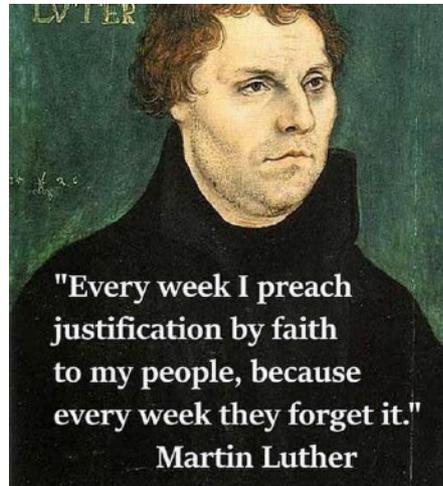

Romans Introduction

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 2 November

Isaiah 55:6-11 • Romans 1:1-7



Let's pray, Lord Jesus, the living word of God. Speak that we might hear. As we hear encourage and empower us we pray, amen.

We come in our introductions series to one of my favourite letters in the NT. Romans is generally considered the single best explanation of our faith and the clearest systematic unpacking of the gospel.

For example, if we want to unpack:

- the meaning and means of salvation.
- justification by faith
- sanctification and glorification
- the work and place of the Law
- the scope of the gospel, among many other things

Romans is the go to book.

As I have done in all the introductions thus far I have tried to take a word or phrase that would help us unpack the rest of the book.

For Roman's I would take the word gospel. Paul talks of the Gospel in the first vs. The holy scriptures in the second vs. and the gospel again in the 3rd vs.

Now to help us see the focus of the Gospel, I think that we could say that if Jesus were reading Paul's introduction to Romans, given what follows in the rest of the letter, Jesus could legitimately say "I am the one that the gospel

story points to". "I Am" the one who is revealed and experienced in the gospel.

V1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. V3 the gospel concerning his son.

It's very clear from Paul's introduction that Jesus is the focus of the Gospel, the good news.

Then following Paul's introduction the first thing he does is make a bold faith claim concerning the gospel. V16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is a power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith".

30 years ago, in my first sermon following my ordination, I wanted to nail my colours to the mast so folk would know clearly where I stood. I wanted folk to know the source of my hope and where I would be putting my focus as I entered ordained ministry.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation for all who have faith." That was the passage I chose.

It's a reminder that at its heart the gospel is the message of the generosity and grace of God. God who does all that is needed. God that requires only one thing of us, faith.

I have shared before that around 25 years ago I had a conversation with my grandad who was well over 90 and in the old soldiers nursing home Granadale.

Grandad was a Catholic, but it was my grandmother, long passed, that had been the very regular attender of mass, and a strong believer. We were living in Westport where I was the Vicar, and Grandad was nearing the end and I knew I would be taking his funeral.

I wanted to put my mind to rest and share the gospel with grandad, just to make sure that he had every opportunity to respond, and I guess get a sense of peace that he really understood what it was about.

Trying my best to think of the best way to broach the subject I asked, "grandad, am I going to see you in heaven"? "Yes" he said. "But first, I'll have to do a few thousand years in purgatory to make up for my sins".

Do you think I was ashamed to say, "grandad, have I got good news for you".

Do you think I was ashamed to tell him that we are saved by faith in the work of Jesus and not by our works.

- That purgatory is not something that the bible teaches.
- That is no need for such a place as purgatory because Jesus has paid the price of sin, past, present, and future.

And because of that, as we trust and hope in him, as we accept the forgiveness that he offers, we do not need to somehow chip in, and do our own bit of penance and suffering, as if Jesus were not quite up to the job.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel it is the power of God for salvation for all who have faith”. As long that is, that that faith, is faith in Jesus.

Now as Paul talks of the power of the gospel he is on the one hand talking of, and pointing to, the power of God, that is spoken of in the Gospel.

- That same power that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead.
- That same power, that same presence, that lives within and transforms the Christian believer into the image and likeness of Christ.

He is also talking of another power. The gospel message, in and of itself, is powerful. As we hear the Gospel God's power is unleashed.

To help unpack that, let's for a moment talk about words, and the power of words in general.

For the prisoner in the dock, when the judge says “ I sentence you to 10 years without parole” those words carry power. Those words are going to shape and control the prisoners life for the next ten years.

In the same way someone saying they “love you” as compared they “hate you” can have power.

- Someone saying they love you can make you float through the day.
- Conversely someone saying they hate you, or that you are useless, can send you into an emotional tail spin, or have you believing you will never achieve anything.

Words have power. The children's nursery rhyme “sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you” is demonstrably untrue, and unhelpful.

Words in general have power. Gospel words have a greater power.

Not just in the sense that the gospel speaks of, and points to, and describes something of the power of God. But also in the sense that there is something of the power of God at work as the gospel is proclaimed.

There is a sense where we can talk about the power of the gospel as the living and active word of God.

Paul as he addresses Timothy, that young pastor, Paul reminds him of the power of the word. It is sharper than any two edged sword. I think that means among other things, it is able to cut through our pretensions, excuses, and our smoke screens.

Remember again the intro to John, In the beginning was the Word. Jesus is the living and powerful presence of God. The word living, revealed through the word written as that word is enlivened and made real to us by the Holy Spirit.

Remember those two on the Emmaus Rd following Jesus Crucifixion. Those two desolate and downcast disciples who thought all their hopes and dreams concerning Jesus had come to nothing.

They did not recognise it was Jesus who was walking with them. There are reasons for that that have to do with spiritual forces that can both blind us to who Jesus is, and help see who Jesus is, but that's another message.

As they walked along Jesus gives what must have been one of the greatest Bible studies in history. Then as those two reflected back on how Jesus had opened the scriptures," and beginning with Moses and the prophets, how he had interpreted to them the things concerning himself."

As they reflected back on that experience they said "how our hearts were burning within us as he opened the scriptures to us".

Have you ever had that feeling when reading or hearing the scriptures, that feeling in your stomach, that warming of the heart, that sense that what you are reading or hearing is truth and God is speaking directly to you?

Here's my point. In some mysterious and spiritual way, something of the power of the Gospel is released in the telling and hearing of the gospel.

As the gospel is faithfully and biblically preached, the hearer can not help but be impacted.

- If we accept and respond to the Gospel we are drawn closer to God and God will impact our lives to a greater extent.

- If we reject, and close ourselves off to the Gospel, the power of the Gospel will drive us further away from the presence of God.

That's one of the reasons I start my sermon in prayer, and my knees are literally the first things that touch the floor on a Sunday morning. For at least two reasons.

Firstly, if I dare to speak for God, I better, by the grace of God, do my best to be a credible witness, lest my life be a stumbling block, and the inconsistency of my words and actions be the reason that someone rejects the gospel.

Secondly, I pray for what was called unction. It's an old fashioned word that points to the need for God's power to be working in, through, and behind the word as it spoken and heard.

“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” Paul says later in Romans. There is much at stake as the gospel is proclaimed.

Several decades ago, one of the most influential Anglican teachers and preachers, John Stott, said this. “The greatest challenge facing the church today is a loss of confidence in the Gospel.”

Be it the gospels challenge to our sinful nature, or the seeming contradiction between scripture and science, or the tensions at work trying to hold a spiritual outlook in a secular culture, much of the church has lost it nerve.

Many of those who inhabit the pulpits are revisionist in their preaching. That is they shape their message according to the norms and dictates of society as compared the lasting and enduring word of God.

It's not a new problem. There has always something of a barrier to gospel acceptance.

The fact that Paul says “I am not ashamed of the Gospel” shows that there were pressures around in his day that would undermine gospel confidence.

In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, “for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”. He goes on to describe the cross as a scandal to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek.

At risk of oversimplification. To the Jew who trusted in getting right with God through sacrifices and keeping the Law, salvation by grace, through faith, and the work of the cross of Christ was a scandal.

To the Greek, the worldly, powerful, culturally and intellectually advanced Greek, the idea of a cross was foolishness.

- Weakness is for losers.
- Sacrifice is for suckers.
- Might is right, and the proof that my god is better than your god, is my god can smash your god.

A God the allows himself to be mocked, spat at, and nailed to a cross. That's just dumb. Foolishness to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews. Contrast Paul, I am not ashamed of the Gospel

What of our time? Can we dare to speak it and face ridicule or indifference?

Can we dare step out in faith. What if we don't have exactly the right words?

Be encouraged. Our confidence is in the gospel passed down to us. As we witness faithfully to Jesus, God will be working.

Yes, firstly, the gospel tells us about the about the power and presence of God that saves us through the life death and resurrection of Jesus.

But secondly, there is also, I believe, a power at work in the telling and hearing of the gospel story. In short,

- As we hear about Jesus, Jesus works.
- As we hear about the righteousness, mercy and grace of God, something of God is experienced.
- As we hear the story of the Saviours' love, something of the saviours love is experienced.
- As we hear of the power of the Gospel, the power of God is at work

Jesus would say: "I am the one that the gospel story points to". "I Am" the one who is revealed and experienced in the gospel.

More "I will work even in and through the proclamation and hearing of the Gospel".

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, the living word of God. Speak that we might hear. As we hear, may we be encouraged and may we be empowered, amen.