

19 December 2010

Advent 4A

Sermon notes:

*Romans 1.1-7*

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*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised 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 declared 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, <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.*

What a way to begin a letter! And in a single sentence which contains, in effect a single thought – that Paul's very existence (as servant, apostle, set apart), and the existence of those to whom he is writing, is caught up in response to God's work in Jesus Christ. Contrast our way of addressing each other in correspondence: "Dear John; "Dear Sir/Madam"; "To whom it may concern..." The difference is not simply a matter of the nobility of the language, or the formality of a letter. Paul is doing something different to what we normally do when we address one another. He doesn't seek

simply to catch the attention of his listeners, but lays down an understanding of what it is by which we might be able to speak to each other or, more to the point, lays down an understanding of what it is by which we might have something *worth* saying to each other. That thing is God's approach to us in Jesus – God's *advent*.

We are now pretty much caught up in the midst of Christmas – even the church which has for centuries considered Christmas to be the period *after* December 25 places a reading about the birth of Jesus today, a week before the traditionally celebrated day. With the coming of Christmas, if we can get past the more sugary versions of the Christmas story, comes also thoughts of God entering into our world. Yet we tend to think about this incarnation, this coming of God to us, in a time-bound way, as something which happened a long time ago and which we now *remember*.

But the point about God entering the world in Christ is not to that there was once a rescue mission to which we constantly look back, but that God and the world have been indelibly marked with each other. Despite the fact that we continue to forget it, "God" can no longer be an abstract idea or some thing distant from the world, but one who has entered into every dimension of what we experience, and has shown himself able to fill those dimensions out, to make them – and us – more themselves, more ourselves. You and I are not simply what we can say about each other or to each other, but are those for whom God entered into the world in that way and for

whom the world has now been changed.

Christian discipleship – the embodied message of Christmas, we might say – is living our lives in the context of these actions of God. It is a matter of not being needlessly distracted by the things happening around us, but interpreting them in the light of the *one* thing which has happened which casts all other things in a new and extraordinary light. The invitation of Christmas – the invitation to Christian discipleship – is an invitation to re-vision ourselves, to understand ourselves as being addressed as Paul addressed those Roman Christians all those years ago. For despite every temptation to think otherwise, you are not the things which have happened to you. You are not your age bracket. You are not your relationship status. You are not your state of health. You are not the things you have. You are not the things you might be losing, however much they might seem to be part of you. Such things, of course, are part of us and they are part of the way we are sometimes addressed, but in such circumstances we are being *reduced* to this or that *part* of our experience.

But Paul's vision is much, much broader. Paul tells the story of Jesus as the story in which we ourselves are caught. Jesus is anchored among us – born of the house of David, and consigned to a death just like ours – and yet also one, who by the power of God, transcends these things *without leaving them behind*. And so Paul speaks of the "grace" which he has received, and which is open to the Romans and to all. Protestantism has long associated grace with forgiveness – and rightly so. But in our passage this morning Paul links

grace to two other experiences which help to flesh it out a bit more. First, he links his own experience of grace with his call to be an apostle – and an apostle to the Gentiles in particular. We do not all receive this particular calling, but the point is the shift of purpose and focus which takes place when we meet Christ and are taken up into his story. For Paul it was a highly visible shift – enough that his conversion led to threats against his life. For us, moving more deeply into the experience of grace may not seem so dramatic from the outside, but the shift of purpose and focus will be real and noticeable nonetheless. The changes are not simply spiritual or psychological but spill into the tangible social and political worlds in which we live.

This Paul indicates with the second experience he links to grace – the gift of peace (v.7). The forgiveness, the gift of God, issues in peace in two ways. First, it is peace between us and God himself, a peace which comes from hearing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus as our own story – the account of how God will also deal with us: God will meet the life of godlessness with a declaration which sets us at peace with him again.

But the gift of peace issues also in changed relations between each other – which is why we pass a sign of peace with each other each week after the declaration of forgiveness. Those who receive the word of peace are those now equipped to speak such words – the children of God are peace *makers* (Matthew 5). In Paul's case the specific work of peace-making had to do with helping the church understand the significance of Christ for the relationship between

the Jews and the Gentiles. For us, the work of peace relates to whatever is required in our own social and political space. The grace of God, then, touches on our relationships to our children and our spouses, our work colleagues and those who share the roads with us. It impinges upon our relationship to those who make the things we buy, and on those who "consume" what we make or offer for our living.

Much is said this time of year about "peace". It seems to be about the only thing which the secular world can distil from the story of Christmas without committing to the apparently "religious" dimensions of the story. The peace which will be propounded in this chatter springs, for the most part, from our unclear longings for an absence of all the things which hassle us, or threaten us. Such longings make sense, of course; no one wants to be hassled or threatened. But peace is not simply the absence of what seems to be the problem; positively, it is the presence of justice and righteousness. The peace which comes from the grace of God in Christ is not simply a matter of our longings, for our longings are unclear and confused. God's peace reveals what is basically missing in us – things mostly hidden from us, or at least absent from our thinking – peace with God, peace with our most fundamental purposes, peace with ourselves – and begins to make possible a treatment of the symptoms of all this in our common lives together, where the absence of peace is most obvious.

The grace of God shifts our focus from what little we can see, to what God sees. And, given a glimpse of what God sees, we are given a different sense of what we are to be

while we wait God's consummation of his plans for the world: at peace with God, and working for peace with each other.

By the grace of God may the peace promised by the prophets and heralded by the angels find its way ever more deeply into the hearts, minds and lives of all God's people.

Amen.