

9th August 2020

Proper 14

Bible Reading Romans 10: 5 – 15

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. Romans 10 v 8.

Paul is writing about how we come into a right relationship with God through God's grace, love, and mercy. He ponders on being right with God through works and being right with God through faith. The reading today finishes with the phrase "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news".

I first heard these words sung from Handel's Messiah when I was a teenager worshipping at our family church in Aberdeen. I instantly loved the melody but had to think about the meaning. Our minister had survived polio and walked with crutches. We used to hold our breath when he came on a pastoral visit to see my grandmother who stayed with us, as he had to negotiate my mother's highly polished red doorstep tiles. However, as a young man, with great strength and agility he always made the ascent safely. It made me think how costly it sometimes is to live the Christian life and to proclaim the Christian message. However, he had a great desire to serve the gospel and from a young age, I appreciated the beauty of this.

Today we live in a strange period of our history, where many places of worship are closed, until risk assessments are complete, and our buildings are declared as COVID-19 secure. It is not always possible to cross doorsteps, or even to enter some buildings such as care homes. We must abide my rules that change every day according to new knowledge about the virus and its spread. What can we learn from Paul's writing about the message we proclaim?

Paul was writing from the new knowledge of the achievements of Christ. It is striking that Paul has a dialogue with scripture and refers to so many verses from the bible. The passage opens with a quotation from Leviticus 18:5, and then takes up lines from Deuteronomy 30:11-14, which Paul reads through the lens of Christian proclamation. Deuteronomy 30:14 becomes, for Paul, a summation of what it means to confess faith in Jesus Christ with the mouth and with the heart. Quotations from Isaiah 28:16 and Joel 2:32 reinforce Paul's ongoing argument about the gospel's inclusion of all. It is good that despite varying degrees of lockdown and social isolation we can still read and listen and learn. There are some house-groups available through bible reading fellowships and we have our daily chapel prayer readings printed for us to use each day. I have enjoyed tuning into church services from my home, although many places of worship are still shut. We can still seek and find a greater understanding and new knowledge about our faith.

Paul considers if our hope comes from a kind of obedience that earns credit with God. First, he quotes Leviticus 18:5 where it says, that if a person meticulously obeys the commandments in the law of Moses, they will find life. That is true, but no one ever has. Then he says that it is not our efforts that wins us goodness, but that this is done for the Christian in Christ, and we have only to graciously accept it. It is easy to feel guilty that we cannot provide all the services to our community that was part of our life before the pandemic. We should not feel guilty and we can find new ways of enjoying sharing the blessings and gift of our faith. It is a time for exploration. We need not be discouraged.

Verses 9 and 10 in this reading from Romans chapter 10, form part of the Christian creed. William Barclay in his commentary on Romans described this well. What does it mean to say, "Jesus is Lord"? The word for Lord is *kurios* and had four stages of meaning. It is the normal title of respect like the English *sir* and the French *monsieur*. It is the normal title of Roman emperors. It is the normal title of the Greek gods. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures it is the regular translation of the divine name, Yahweh, or Jehovah. So, Christians have a sense of the utter uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

Christians also believe that Jesus is alive and risen from the dead. Not only do we believe in our hearts, but we confess with our lips. We can still demonstrate our faith in lockdown, in the things that we do and the words that we use.

In many ways our communications have changed. Writing letters instead of travelling, chatting on social media, limited visiting in gardens, staying in household bubbles, learning new skills in recording services. We can use our time in different ways. Some of the greatest literature and music were written by previous generations living through plagues and other misfortunes. Do we have gifts that we did not have time to develop, because of the busyness of our lives and can they now be developed to find new ways of expressing our faith? That surely is a beautiful thing, if done in response to the love and mercy and forgiveness of God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ. Can we emerge stronger through our time of trial? By God's grace we surely can.

Prayer.

Our time is in your hands, Lord. Help us to use time wisely, grateful for each day. As we see the beauty in creation, fill us with gratitude that you have created each one of us, special in your sight. Make us beautiful in our service to you and to others. May we express each day something of your love, peace, mercy, and forgiveness. Give us strength to cope with the challenges of each day in the knowledge of your love for each one of us and our neighbours.

Christine Macleod. Lay preacher.