

Worship @ home  
10.30 Sunday, 20 September 2020  
Epistle to the Romans: 12 – 13 v 7

**Call to worship:**

Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name for ever. For great is your love towards me. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will praise you.

**Hymn**

**This is the day**

**Prayers:**

Lord God we come into your presence this morning, leaving behind the stresses and strains of all that would distract us from offering you the worship you deserve. We know you to be our Sovereign ruler over all that we have and are, so we worship you now. May our worship reflect your holiness, glory and love; and may we be at peace with you and with each other.

Father, we come believing in our Lord Jesus Christ; believing that you care for all your creation; that there is nothing and there is no one who is beyond your immeasurable loving kindness and compassion. We believe that you made the world to be good filling it with sufficient resources for everyone – just so long as we share. We believe that you have given us all we need to respond to your call on our lives and to be your people working with and for you each day. We believe that you are a great and a wonderful God. We believe this morning, that our words of thanks and praise, our songs of adoration and our songs of joy, are empty when we act selfishly instead of selflessly. We believe that all our promises to keep faith, and our good intentions are a waste of effort unless we back them up with words and actions that demonstrate your love for all people, giving glory to you.

Heavenly Father, we believe – help us to display your glory, to make our praises heart felt and help us to make our love for you real, as we love all to whom you send to us and the people we meet along the way, no matter who, no matter where, no matter when.

Father, we thank you for the endless love you share amongst your people; thank you for sending Jesus to us; thank you that he is our example, his life death and resurrection is the true measure of your power and authority in the world.

Our Father, by the power of your Holy Spirit show us how to be like Jesus who loved the unlovable, forgave the unforgiveable and touched the untouchable. As we offer you our thanksgiving Father, we ask that you will hear us as we confess now that we have not always lived up to the name and example of Jesus.

Loving and forgiving Father, forgive us our hard hearts and our closed minds. Forgive us that we are so often wrapped up in our own concerns that we neglect to hear the cry of our neighbour, those near and those far away. Forgive us our selfish attitudes and our angry words that build walls of division that don't you want us to build. Forgive us our unkind thoughts and our lack of generosity, and our indifference to the pain and sorrow of our neighbour. Forgive us for working so hard for our own and our family's benefit that we have little or no time or space you. Father, forgive us and by your Holy Spirit teach us, as people called according to your purpose to love our neighbour and all those who cross our path as ourselves. Father, as we trust and believe your presence is with us now; hear us as we pray. In the name of Jesus who gave himself that we might find ourselves and in finding ourselves then give of ourselves to bring you glory. Amen

**Introduction:**

One of the programmes I enjoy watching on the television is MasterChef. I suppose it's because I like to cook. I also like to watch ordinary home cooks turn into super cooks who could and often do take their

place in a professional kitchen. Added to that, I think we are blessed as each series is not repeated time and time again on terrestrial TV. One test I like more than the others in the show is the invention test that comes early on in each programme. Each contestant has the opportunity to take from the larder, any meat, fish, veg plus all the necessary seasonings, bits and pieces to make a dish of their choice. Usually, the cooks take ingredients for a dish that they have cooked and refined many times. They know that their dish will be well cooked, look good and taste good when it comes to be assessed by the judges. Some contestant don't. They try to impress the judges using ingredients that they are not too familiar with and perhaps don't do themselves any favours or don't succeed to the next round.

Cooking, as most you know is all about the recipe; it's about having the right ingredients; knowing how to cook the individual bits and put them together to make a whole; it's about presenting the dish to whoever is going to eat it so that it is pleasing to the eye and tastes as good as it looks. (That sounds like an advert for cat food!).

Having spent time reading and re-reading Paul's letter to the Romans, I have come to the conclusion that Paul's method of writing all his letters is like giving a cook a recipe to make a dish for the family. I've said before Paul always told his readers what he is going to tell them, then he tells them in detail, and then he tells them what he's told them, ending with a blessing and a greeting to those he knows. So taking the thought of his letter to the Romans as a recipe for all Christians, let me suggest that the first 8 chapters are all about how the essential ingredients of faith for every Christian are to be worked out together. Ingredients like, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and hope, plus mercy, grace, hope, forgiveness.

Then chapters 9 – 11 are all about how Christians – Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians and others who are to become a united new family of God. That is for the Jewish Christians to let go of their past Levitical laws and practices and truly believe in Jesus. And for the new Christians to be willing to accept, live and work with anyone and everyone who comes into the family so that a cohesive loving unit, living a Jesus shaped life is presented to the unbelieving world.

For me, chapters 12 – 15 are all about presentation; that is how those on the outside see those on the inside of God's family. Just as Paul was upset and concerned about the whole Jewish nation not coming to Jesus whilst still trusting God to do his stuff throughout the forthcoming generations, Paul was undeterred about making his views known about how all 'Christians' are to live. Paul knew from his own experience in and amongst the Jews and the Gentiles that it is what people 'see and hear' that draws attention to the Gospel and it is his desire that Christians focus on Jesus; for them to ensure that Jesus is at the centre of all that they are and do as individuals and collectively as church.

Unlike most recipe books of today, Paul's letter was not illustrated with a picture of the end product. All he had was in his head – Christ crucified once for all time – and on his heart – Christ risen, ascended and with him forever. Elsewhere in other letters Paul does paint word pictures for us, but here, he reiterates all he's said in the early chapters about following Jesus' example beginning with instructions on how to live as God's family going forward. Read:

**Reading: Romans 12 vv 1 – 2**

**Reflection: Your body**

You will no doubt recall how Paul had begun his letter by writing about what he'd heard about the church in Rome. Whilst he wrote how much he was thankful of the fact that there were Christians in the city, Paul was encouraged with what they were doing. Alongside his approval, Paul was disparaging about their disunity. It hurt him to know that there were many amongst the community who still had connections with what was going on in society outside the church and some were still involved in the activities and practices that did not conform to what was expected of a Christian. Roman culture at that time paid no respect to a person's physical body. Depravity and sexual immorality was an accepted way of life, men and women were bought and sold for the sole purpose. I think Paul's Jewish sensibilities came to the forefront of his thinking, probably causing him to underline the importance of every member of the whole Church to totally change their life and lifestyle, thereby recognising that they are made in

God's image and for his purpose. God is holy, and Paul intimates that God wants nothing less for his people.

In today's parlance, we use the word 'make-over' indicating a complete new look from head to toe on the outside. I would say that Paul insisted here that the make-over included the inside too: the heart, soul and mind. Again going back to Paul's Jewish ancestry and Torah knowledge, any person back then standing before God would know the Shema and that the words therein were and are to be their way of life. I think too that in mentioning that our bodies are a means of worship, there is an instruction for all readers to reflect on how they use and misuse their bodies. Plus the fact that Paul infers that everything we do has to be done to the best of a Christian's ability, ('it will do', isn't in Paul's vocabulary) and offered to God as an act of worship, even the most menial of tasks. For Paul, worship isn't just a Sabbath day event, but an all day, every day pre-requisite and should be evident in the lives of all God's people. Whilst Paul may not have continued to wear his phylactery with the words of the Shema on his forehead, the words were undoubtedly written on his heart, soul and mind as he lived for Christ and the Church presenting the Gospel to the world.

Just thinking about these few verses and reflecting on our own community's place in society, it makes me wonder how those on the outside looking in, see us as we represent and present the gospel.

Have you noticed how Paul easily moved from writing about the activities of the human body to those of the church? Let's read:

**Reading: Romans 12 vv 3 – 8**

**Reflection: The body of Christ**

Again, he reiterated instructions and expectations he mentioned in the earlier chapters. There is something here about there being no one-up-man-ship, injustice or inequality within the church.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes has it, there is nothing new under the sun, including synagogue / church members squabbling about who is the most important or which job is more important in the scheme of things. Paul would have none of it. In speaking plainly and again from experience Paul insists that every member of the church is valued and has a part to play, and every job is essential to make things work. As I've said before, for Paul as he encouraged the church to live for Christ and be Gospel Messengers, they no longer needed to be tied to the hierarchical laws of who can and cannot do whatever within the church community or the work of a gospel messenger. In calling each person into his family God equips them and equips us to do the task to fulfil his purpose. So within each community God places those he needs all working together to do his will. Remember Paul said, '*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose.*' Romans 8 v 28. Elsewhere Paul refers to the Church as God's co-workers, God's building bearing the Gospel. Unity, compliance to living a Jesus shaped life mattered to Paul and this is what I think he wanted the church to present to the world outside.

I know that we have all heard many a sermon on Romans 12 vv 9 – 16 entitled: Love. The reading is included in the Lectionary and read once every three years, usually in year A at the end of August or beginning of September depending on how many Sundays there are in Ordinary Time. So I'm not going to say much about the verses today, other than the fact that the instructions are a cut and paste from some of Paul's other letters and are about how a Christian should behave that is: putting others first and not living a life of double standards – saying one thing and doing another. Hospitality – for friend or stranger was a key commandment for the Jews and Paul makes it clear for us that it is an expectation of all Christians. Actions speak louder than words and just as he's done before, Paul quoted from the Torah about what God expects from his people – God alone is the one who will sort out the wrong doers. Suffice it to say that Paul wanted the Church to obey the Jesus commandment '*to do to others what you would have them do to you*', Matthew 7 v 12. As we shall see next week, sharing God's love, shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was constantly on Paul's mind.

Before we look at the first part of Romans 13 let's sing:

**Hymn**                      **Make me a channel of your peace**

**Reading:**        **Romans 13 vv 1 – 7**

**Reflection:**        **Obedying the authorities**

As a Pharisee Paul was under the authority of the temple hierarchy – the Chief Priest and the Council with no leeway to go off-piste as it were. As the one commissioned by Jesus, that all changed. His mission was no longer inward looking for one nation but open and expansive to the whole of humanity. The past restrictions were lifted, including the self-centred piety of the Jews. But for Paul 'authority:' the assertion from the Old Testament that all kings, queens and people in overall authority in each country were appointed by God still had to be obeyed. Obedience to God first, then obedience to the rule of law wherever it is imposed mattered, so much so that he laid down the law if you know what I mean.

Writing again from his own experience of his fellow Jews and their tendency to rebel against any authority that wasn't from the Torah, he set down both a warning and a number of strict instructions. He had lived through the battles between the Jewish nation and the Roman invaders and the ongoing acts of terrorism as the Romans took possession of the land God had given his people. He knew of the brutal lengths some Jews had gone to not just against the Romans but their own countrymen who were in the pockets of the conquerors. Though Paul was aware of the continuous acts of Jewish terrorism against the Rome, some commentators suggest that Paul, in instructing the Christians to be obedient to the authorities was supporting their stamp on society. Though the occupied countries didn't like it, the conquerors did bring peace and some form of security to the people. He was concerned that the Jewish Christians would revert back to their old ways when Caesar began to blame the Jews and put them under notice of death. Paul wasn't asking for the Christians to be acquiescent to the brutality of the Romans but to seek justice from them and to refrain from causing injury or death to them; to keep the commandment and do what is right by being good citizens.

Paul also recognised the fact that without the 'authorities' lawlessness would prevail and the consequences of the strongest and richest taking control would not comply with what God requires of those within his family. The Prophet Micah said, '*What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*' (Micah 6 v 8). This was a maxim that Paul lived by so when we consider Paul's opinion of the Romans as a race and nation, we have to consider the impact they had on him and on the Jewish nation as a whole. We've already mentioned that the Romans were disliked for their cruelty and their means of disposing of those who railed against their authority. Paul knew that throughout the conquered world Caesar was hailed as god and worshipped. Paul also knew that God used the Romans to put Jesus Christ to death on a cross; and that Caesar dismissed God's authority as he persecuted the Jews in Rome and out of it. So whilst giving his readers a warning, Paul I think believed that the authority in Caesar's hand was God given and gave an instruction to all Christians to obey and not get in the way of the state authorities. So with his Jewish / Pharisaic head on he quoted from the Scriptures again about putting God first and his commandments and reiterating how Christians should live a Jesus shaped life with one another. And Jesus had something to say about God and Caesar. Let's read:

**Reading:**        **Matthew 22 vv 15 – 22**

**Reflection:**        **God v Caesar**

The writer, Matthew the tax collector, was very much accustomed to dealing with taxation. As we know everyone hated Tax collectors especially dishonest ones. But as we read this gospel passage we should try to understand why the story is included and how it connects with our study on Paul's letter to the Romans about obeying the authorities.

First we should not that the pesky Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus. They couldn't go to him themselves because their methods of collecting taxes was questionable, so they sent some of the Pharisee School

students plus some local big-wigs connected to the Roman occupiers to question Jesus for them. Remember that God had hardened the hearts of the Pharisees so they didn't believe Jesus to be the Messiah and wanted to discredit him in view of anyone and everyone. The trap was to see whose side Jesus was on and to find out by whose authority he did what he did. Reading between the lines, we know that the Pharisees said one thing and did another without being hassled by the Roman authorities; and that the ordinary Jews were severely dominated by the Romans to the point of extreme poverty. I've said before that the Pharisees loved money and all that it could buy; hypocritically though, they weren't so fond of paying the poll tax to Rome or handling the coin minted for that purpose. You will recall that God commanded the Jews to make no image of him; the denarii used had an image of Caesar on one side and an inscription calling Caesar god on the other. So in answering the question from the students and others, Jesus turned the question back on them. On inspecting the coin, Jesus eventually responded: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22 v 21 RSV). I like the Revised Standard wording of this quotation as 'to render' means 'to surrender all that is due' making the instruction Jesus sent back to the Pharisees a commandment. Whilst Jesus didn't say anything about disobeying Caesar or the Roman authorities he did put God and his authority over the whole world at the centre. In doing that, I believe Jesus made the point that God's people are to live by God's Law. God is Sovereign and the final authority is God's alone. Kings, queens, governments may demand our money by way of taxes, may ask for our voluntary services; they have no claim on our bodies our hearts, souls and minds – we owe our obedience to God.

So as he penned this letter I believe that Paul wanted his readers in Rome and us now to take to heart and put first in our lives the obedience to God and then live at peace with all humanity. Let's sing the song that speaks of obeying that commandment.

**Song: I want to walk with Jesus Christ**

Whilst we are called to conform to the requirements the government put on us, we also live in times when people are seeking after hierarchical roles within the church, so as to impose their will not God's on those within. Over the years Church leaders have manipulated the scriptures to bring them in line with how society was and is behaving in each generation. A sort of nod to the populace instead of living the Shema and the teachings of Jesus. It still goes on. It seems to me that Paul was right in calling all Christians to live Jesus shaped lives, knowing that in putting God first, believing in Jesus, loving our neighbour as ourselves God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen

### **Prayers of intercession**

Loving and Holy God, you have promised to hear us when we call to you in the name of Jesus. Father hear our prayers today for all those in our world who are working for peace and concord amongst all nations; for those who constantly bring to our notice the injustice suffered by many; and those who campaign for justice for all. We pray for those who are working to bring an end to child poverty; to provide meals and shelter for the hungry and homeless. We pray today especially for: the people in Lebanon and for those countries who have given shelter to the millions of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria; for those families in America whose homes and lives have been devastated by the forest fires. We pray for all those who struggle for the oppressed, the exploited, the under-privileged and all who are denied their proper rights. We pray especially for those who work to release those who are held captive through no fault of their own; those women who are tricked into travelling across the world seeking a better life only to be disappointed, left high and dry and passed from one man to another for money. We pray today Lord, for those who serve within the judicial system – barristers, lawyers, judges, magistrates, jurors, and court officials – all those whose responsibility it is to see that justice is administered fairly, and to all. Give them, Lord, your wisdom, a measure of your integrity, courage and dedication, so that they may discharge their duties faithfully, upholding the law and ensuring all people are treated with respect, despite what they may have or not done.

Lord there has been much in the press and on TV about the state of our Police force and the work they will have to undertake during the Covid-19 pandemic. In these times, we pray for each officer and all those involved in the prevention or detection of crime, and we pray too for those who work in our prisons, whether as officers or governors. Grant them your protection Lord, help them to do all that is asked of them fairly and to the best of their ability. Help us too to be good citizens, obeying and complying with the rules placed on us at this time.

We pray for those who turn to you for courage and strength during their time of illness and we ask that you will hear their prayers for healing and that you answer them so that your will is done in their lives. *(Make your own prayers known to God)*

We pray for Hilary and give you thanks for her faithfulness to you and to this fellowship; for Dorothy Swallow on the occasion of her birthday, and ask that you will bless her every day as she honours you in all she does. We pray too for those we know and don't know who live on in Church Lane and the roads off, in Radcliffe Lane, Crawshaw Road, Rise, Park Close and Hill and Spinners Chase that they will know your love through our words and actions as we come together each week.

Our Father you are God of love; you know us through and through so we pray for ourselves. We have heard again today how Paul asked the Christians in Rome and all future Christians including us to offer to you our whole lives, not just our worship on a Sunday but everything we are and help us to make sure that whatever we do, however menial or difficult, we do for you. During the days of the coming week help us to see you in each new day and to be aware of your presence in the mundane and the different. Teach us so that all our words, all our actions, are said and done with cheerfulness so that those around us will know that we are Gospel Messengers working with you and for you in our town.

**We say the Lord's Prayer:**

**Hymn:**

**Lord for the years**

**Blessing:**

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us today and all days. Amen