

Reading: Romans 13: 8-14 (NT page 1140)

Reader: Martin Shiels

Background to the reading

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the congregation in Rome. Rome was the capital of the Roman empire and was a city that Paul desperately wanted to visit to preach the Gospel there. We do not know a lot about the church in Rome. It seems as if Gentiles and Jews were members, with the former in the majority. Such a composition is to be expected in a cosmopolitan city with a strong Jewish colony, and is supported by an analysis of the Epistle itself. In some parts of his argument Paul seems to be addressing Jews, as, for instance, when he appeals to Abraham as 'our father' in other parts he turns his thought exclusively towards Gentiles.

Certain immediate circumstances suggest themselves as the occasion which prompted the production of this Epistle. Paul's intention to do further missionary work in Spain caused him to appeal to the Christians at Rome to support him in this venture. As he contemplates his visit to the Roman church he realizes that he may have a spiritual gift to impart to them and that he as well as they may be mutually encouraged.

But it is no coincidence that the first eleven chapters after the introductory portion read more like a treatise than a letter. The apostle Paul might have realized the strategical importance of the Church in Rome and wanted to make sure they understand the theology and ethical consequences of Jesus' salvation.

In our reading the apostle makes it clear that although they can pay off their debts to the Roman authorities, there is one debt they can never pay off. As followers of Jesus Christ they are indebted to love unconditionally. They have to love one another as they naturally love themselves. He is not telling them something new. Jesus taught his followers that the commandment to love is a summary of God's law.

It is important to love because the night is nearly over. The images of night and day emphasizes the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. They must act like people of the light as the day is already dawning. People who live in the light loves unconditionally while people who lives in the darkness do things of the night which Paul lists as “orgies, drunkenness, immorality indecency, fighting and jealousy”. Jews often characterized Gentile behavior in terms of wild drinking parties and parties of sexual nature, and in general they were not far off the mark. These activities were done at night.

He is telling them to clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus and resist their sinful nature.

The message was clear to the Christian followers of Rome. They must not succumb to darkness but remain in the light of Jesus Christ’s salvation.

MP 1012

These are the days of Elijah

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 4:

“4 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent where we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

In a way the text talks about different things but also about the same things.

In one breath the apostle Paul talks about the one debt that we as followers will always have namely to love one another unconditionally. People in the world who do not know us, must see that we are followers of Jesus through our actions of love. In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor ACT as if you did".

Something which happened last Friday evening in Glasgow when a police helicopter fell from the sky and crashed into a crowded pub. All the people were helping one another. Instead of running away, bystanders hastened them to the pub and formed a "human chain" to help the injured to get out of the pub. Everyone, even the first minister talked about the people's reaction to the tragedy. What struck me on the news last night was the church service that was offered to all the people affected....

And yes when we love unconditionally, people will know that - through our actions - we are people who walk in the light of God's salvation. There is no way of serving God by actions who does not speak of love.

Unfortunately we live in a world that does not always support or like those who walk in the "light". But we must be mindful this Christmas - with the darker nights that we are followers of Jesus Christ who is our only light. And when we light candles this Christmas, may we remember that Jesus' light are still shining in the darkness and will never succumb to the darkness.

And when we speak about clothes may we remember to firstly "clothe" ourselves with Christ, meaning whatever we do or say, always ask ourselves: "Is this what I am saying paying tribute to the King of heaven" is this what I am doing a witness of His holy name.

May we forget about Armani, or Guttchi or whatever brand name we fancy, and focus on the brand above all brands, namely Jesus Christ.

May we be proud every time we wear our faith in the Lord Jesus on our sleeves this Christmas.

Amen