

TUESDAY COMMUNION

"Obedience - but not as we've known it"

Hymn: 465 We have a gospel to proclaim

Reading: Romans 1. 1-7

Prayers:

About twenty years after the death of Jesus a former member of the strict Jewish order of the Pharisees wrote a letter to the church in Rome.

Elsewhere he tells of his plans. He is on his way to Jerusalem to deliver a gift from the largely gentile church in what is now Greece to the church in Jerusalem. Then, after delivering this gift of money with which the local church can buy food for its people Paul intends to make his way to Spain.

En route, he intends to visit the church which has been founded in the capital of the Roman Empire, Rome. It is by far the biggest city in the world with a population of probably a million people.

What marks this city as different from the other cities Paul has visited is that the church hasn't been founded by him. He recognises that he doesn't have the same rights that he has over other churches and his letter is in many ways a way of introducing himself and the Gospel that he preaches.

Paul believes that he is called by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles. We are familiar with the story of how Paul came to Christian faith. Paul's passion for his Jewish faith had made him both extremely strict in his interpretation of the law and zealous in his opposition to those who deviated from it.

He was present and probably the instigator of the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. He set off for Damascus to seize the Christians in that city where there had long been a large Jewish community. On the way, he experienced an encounter with the risen Christ which proved to be a turning point in his life.

He came to believe that God had called him for a purpose and purpose was to be a bearer of what he calls "the Gospel of God", to those who were gentiles.

At the heart of this Gospel there is the story of how God has brought a new way of life to the people of this world through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, one way of understanding the Letter to the Romans is that Paul is sharing with his readers his understanding of this God of grace and its consequences for the human race.

At times this letter can make many demands upon us as Paul tries to explain his Gospel using words and ideas that can sound quite strange to us. One of those words is "obedience". To us it can have a harsh tone with implications of, "You must do what I tell you, or else". But when Paul says he wants to bring about "the

obedience of faith among all the gentiles” he is speaking about gaining a favourable response.

Glad and willing assent is very different to dull obedience to a command one doesn't want to obey. I suppose that is what a good preacher is trying to do. Indeed, it's what we are seeking to do whenever we share with another person what we have found to be important to us.

It's not a matter of do this and do that because God, like some army general, has commanded it. Rather it's about offering an attractive story which the hearer may choose to adopt as part of their understanding of life.

Paul's story will centre on what God has done in Jesus. He will tell this story with what people have understood what God has been saying to them in the past.

He will try and make it a reasonable story and so it will contain a well thought through argument. It will also be a story with passion because Paul has stake his life on the truth of what he is wishing to share.

As we listen to Paul he is inviting us to enter into an extraordinary story which, if it is a true story about the nature and will of God, gives us a whole new way of understanding the big picture of how we can share in the extraordinary richness of life in God's world.

It is about God's "grace and peace" to the people of Rome and to us, the love which reaches out to us all and the new way of living together in his world.

Amen.