

## Romans 3.9-20 10<sup>th</sup> January 2010.

### Home Group Notes:

#### Welcome:

1. What was the best present you gave to someone else?
2. What New Year's Resolutions have you made this year?

Worship: I realise that lots of you are in the habit of playing a CD song and that's okay but between here and Easter make a real effort to up this bit, take a little longer, sing aloud something. It's the one moment in the evening that separates this from being a Book Club. If you're too small to sing then say a Psalm together. Psalm 14. (its quoted by Paul)

Word: NB all my questions looked really good when I wrote them. But they lose something when emailed so don't worry if one of your questions looks bizarre just go with the ones that seem to produce fruit. Please do email me with extra questions.

1. Read Romans 3.9-20. (3.1-8 was used on Sunday as a kind of recap).
2. Is Paul exaggerating? Do none of you seek God? Do you all have the poison of vipers on your lips? Etc?
3. Paul quotes the Jewish bible a lot here (chase up the refs). If you were a Jewish Christian listening to this how would you feel? Pagan Christians wouldn't get the references. Is Paul trying to say something extra clearly to Jewish Christians here?
4. Seek God, tell the truth, do good. It's a good sermon but not as helpful as the dull one about sin. Why?
5. What does it mean to be Under Sin. (Rom 6.14, 7.14, Gal 3.22 all use this expression).
6. Recap: Who has Paul been having a go at so far in this letter?
7. Are there any more excuses we can think up so as to avoid responsibility for our sin? (eg: Blame the parents, the genes, I'm not as bad as some I know, at least I'm a Churchgoer so I'm alright).
8. This sermon / passage may have made you feel guilty. What's the difference between feeling guilty and actually being guilty? Which is the more important? Which are you?
9. I implied that this passage will help us with evangelism. How on earth can it do that! No one wants to hear they're a sinner!

#### Works:

Pray for each other, pray for those who're struggling in this cold. Is there anything helpful anyone can do for them? Who's keeping in touch with them to make sure they're okay?

Close by reading the next bit Rom 3.21-26.

There's a big part of me that really **doesn't like this morning's bible readings:** There is no one who seeks God, their mouths are full of curses and bitterness, there is no fear of God. No one.

And I'm thinking, that's not fair, that's not true either. St Paul is being **mean** in his exaggerated **pessimistic** picture of humanity. Does he have **so little faith** in humans? Surely there is some good, there are some who seek God, there are some who's mouths aren't constantly full of cursing. This is too much Paul, you have **gone too far**.

If I may quote **Samwise** Gamgee – and its been too long – **There's some good** in this world Mr Frodo and its worth fighting for.

And if I may quote **Aslan** speaking to Prince Caspian - “You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” said Aslan. “And that is both **honour enough** to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor in earth. Be content.”

Not so long back I was preaching to you about the **wonderful glory of humanity** – we are made in the **image** of God – that is the deepest truth about you. There is another truth that we sin, yes, but there is a **deeper truth that we have forgotten** and so we walk with bowed shoulders and we feel unduly guilty all the time.

Our culture and our liturgy has told us for too many generations that we are **miserable sinners** and has forgotten to tell us about the **joy and glory** of who we have been made in the **image of** and who has **saved** us.

But today we have this conclusion that St Paul has been building up to for weeks – it started with a **diatribe** against **the sinful Them** and Theys of this world and before we condemned them we realised that They were our **ancestors** and They have also **become the culture** in which we live and move and breathe.

So we looked at whether we might condemn various **moralisers** and we found that the great trick there is to distract God and **point to others** and talk about **their faults** rather than face up to your own.

It's a great tactic in the short term. It makes **me feel better** for a bit and you feel more guilty – after all I'm better than you are – and then we realise what a lot of **nonsense** that all is.

And then we looked at whether it helped to have any **religious paperwork** and on the one hand we saw that there were excellent reasons for signing up, getting baptised and confirmed and being part of God's family – not only is there the joy of being on a rota for Sunday groups and cleaning, but there's the joy of giving financially and then spiritually speaking we have the Bible after all, and that's got to do us some good!

But we found that having the paperwork didn't bring us the **privileges** we rather hoped for, instead it has brought us **responsibilities**.

So what are we to conclude from all this? Very simply that we're **in the same boat** – Jew and Gentile alike. We're all in the same boat. And our boat is a long way up a creek. Some of us are scrabbling around looking for a **paddle** and we think that maybe our religious paperwork will do; that being a Jew will be some **form of privileged protection** from the steep falls that come at the end of this creek.

And it turns out that the **Law isn't a paddle, it's a map** and it tells us how very far up the creek we are.

Now I realise that this isn't turning out to be the kind of sermon you like. You like sermons that have some good **helpful advice**. And so there is a **technique** for squeezing advice out of a passage like this – you simply turn Paul's advice around – so **Paul says No one seeks** God – so you say to yourself, well that's fine then because obviously the **answer to my predicament is to seek** God.

Paul says “Their tongues practice deceit” so you say ‘Fine, I'll **tell the truth** then’.

Paul says **Their feet** are swift to shed blood, so you say Ok I'll **do good**.

And now you give yourself a pat on the back, you have managed to create some good advice where Paul didn't give any – **Go seek God, speak the truth, do some good.**

That's not a bad sermon. But you'll find that you're still up a creek and you're still without a paddle.

What this passage is all about is **hearing the bad news** and sometimes we need to stop and slowly take on board just how bad it really is **before** we hear some words of advice or **comfort** or hope.

You sin. Thank you! Tell me something I didn't know! **Its not all your fault.** Some of it is your fault but you are a product of your times and culture.

And I should stop saying You. **Its really me too.** Its an **Us** and its not just an Us here but an Us throughout this **land** regardless of age, culture, gender, creed, colour, sexuality. And its **global**, and its for all of Us throughout all **time**, past, present and future.

We really need to hear how far up this creek We are. It starts with Us being **born outside** of the Garden of Eden. So that means we have an ancient and **proud heritage of sin** into which we're born.

It's a bit trite but it's a start - to talk about the pride of the English on account of our **colonial** past, but sometimes you can still see it in our **arrogance and conceit.**

**We** didn't have the best of starts, we were **born** into a fallen world where mistakes and pain happen. We had **good parents** who did the best they could but they had their faults and we have **inherited their tendencies** to sin and be selfish.

We have then **rubbed shoulders** with other **role models** who exert themselves in this world and we have learned from them ways to put ourselves forward and other people down.

And whilst it is good news that we are creative and unique, in the context of sin this means that we have **each leaned new and creative ways of sinning** and being selfish and passing that on to the next generation.

And I need to remember that I was not born a **tabula rasa**, a blank piece of paper, but born with a tendency to trouble as sure as sparks fly upwards (see Job 5.7).

Now all this might be making you **feel really bad** and guilty.

Yes we sin but its more than that, we **breathe in the polluted air of sin**, we were born in sin, we eat sin all the time, sometimes we can **see it for ourselves** but very often we cannot see our sins because of our blind spots.

Some of you will feel **exhausted** by this. Others of you will seek to excuse yourselves of the blame and say Well if Sin is so prevalent to life and society – if it is in me by both nature and nurture then **I am not at fault.**

And of course it was ever thus – Adam says to God, The woman you gave me. **Blame God**, blame God for the apple, and for the woman and avoid as much responsibility as possible.

You can be witty if you like at this point and say God shouldn't have told Adam not to eat the apple, He should have told him **not to eat the snake.** (Garrison Keiler)

But it wouldn't change much. And **we can talk** about freedom and predestination and hope that such definitions help us to **forget our dilemma** for a bit longer.

Actually St Paul is **not looking to stir up** in you guilt and fear and dread but a **healthy humility** – I quoted Aslan at the beginning saying 'You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,' said Aslan. "And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and **shame enough** to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor in earth. Be content."

And that's good. It is supposed to have the effect of making us **Humble** and making us realise how **very desperately** we are in need of a saviour. It should **cure us of our smugness** and presumption and I'm alright Jack.

It should also engender some **empathy**. I'm up the same creek with you. Neither of us have a paddle. You may be a **worse sinner** than me, but that just shows me how **judgemental** I am!

You may not be such a sinner as me, but **we together** are in this predicament. You might think it would incline us to have a bit more of a **blitz spirit**.

Lucy & I were shopping in **Seaford** in a cramped superstore that was packed full of people who'd eaten everything after Christmas and were panicking on account of the impending snow. Most people were grumpy that there were others there but a few of us relaxed and smiled and helped each other. I talked to one couple in the queue about whether we should start up a **sing a long** to while the time away!

We're so **keen to judge**, but this teaching is leading us to a **deeper humility** and a **truer empathy**. It's the sort of thing that when you hear what comes next should make evangelism easier and more natural because we will be speaking and living the goodnews out of that quiet humility and with real empathy.

Michael Green said 'Most religions tell you something you must do. **This religion** tells you of something **God has done** through Jesus on the Cross.' (I can't find this ref).

And that's what we're coming to, next time.

So today, be **humbled** by the conclusion of St Paul that you already know – I sin, you sin, he sins, she sins, we sin, you sin, they sin. It's **not the deepest** truth about us but it is a valid truth. We together are up a creek without a paddle.

May this teaching **create in Us a fresh humility**. May we appreciate that our sins - what we do and don't do and think and say **Matter** and sometimes **hurt** others, even those we love. And may that truth **cut us to the core** and leave us humble.

May this teaching lead us **away from judging** others and towards a **real empathy** for all people. We all sin, so none of us can claim any moral high ground.

And in this **desperate state**, may we look eagerly to the joyful wonder of **Christmas**, and to the power of **Easter**, and to the next bit that St Paul teaches: **But now, a righteousness** from God has been made known!

Humility, Empathy and Hope. Amen.