

The Word Is Near You

In the name of him who is Lord of all, dear friends in Christ: I like our system of assigned lectionary readings for each Sunday. It forces preachers such as me to deal with texts that treat the whole broad scope of Christian teachings instead of simply cherry picking the easy ones or dwelling constantly on my favorite hobby horses. If I had a complaint about the system, though, it would be that often texts appear as if dropped from the sky without the surrounding context needed to properly understand what's being said and why. Today's reading from Paul's letter to the church at Rome is a case in point. So, before we tackle it, let's back out and get the big picture.

Paul writes to the church at Rome sometime during his third mission journey, which took him throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and into Greece. When he writes, he's not yet been to Rome or anywhere near it. He may know a few of the people there in the congregation, but most of them are strangers to him. And so in writing, it's like he's teaching them for the first time. The result is that the first eight chapters of his letter contain the finest and clearest exposition of the Christian faith we could possibly have. He takes his readers first to the deepest depths of the problem of human sin. And once he's got everyone convicted and feeling the wrath of God, he brings them step by meticulous step to see and understand what God has done to save sinners by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Son. By the time he gets to the end of chapter eight, he's got you to the very top: to the sure and certain victory we have in Christ, declaring, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" These eight chapters are sometimes called the "Roman Road" because of the way they explain the Christian faith so thoroughly and well.

The Apostle devotes the next three chapters, nine through eleven, dealing with a different subject: it's the problematic question of the Jews. What's that? Well, it turns out that most of the members of the church at Rome (and all of the places where Paul has planted churches) are Gentiles not Jews. Sure, there may be a few members with Jewish ancestry, but most Jewish people are rejecting the Christian faith completely. They want nothing to do with it. Some are violently attacking it. They'd like to see the Church of Christ destroyed. So, if you're one of these Gentile believers, you've got to be wondering why is it that so many of these Jewish people who all along have had the sacred Scriptures and who were expecting their Messiah to come missed him when he did and even now continue to flatly reject his Gospel, while so many of us who in ignorance were worshipping idols and had never heard of a Messiah, Jewish or otherwise, have come to faith in Jesus? You'd expect it to be the other way around: that the Church would be mostly Jews with only a handful of Gentiles. And this raises another question: if what Paul says is true, that if "God is for us who can be against us?" then what happened to them? Wasn't God for them? He said he was. Then why does it now seem that he's rejected his own people? Take it a step further: if he's rejected his own chosen people, how can I be sure that at some time in the future he won't reject me too?

Paul acknowledges that this is one of the most disturbing and personally painful truths that he has to face. To be sure, in last week's Epistle from Romans chapter nine, we heard Paul say how he might wish himself accursed for the sake of his fellow Jews. That is, if by being damned to hell himself he could save some of them, he would gladly do that. Now, that's a very Christ-like thought: to be willing to make such a sacrifice; but Paul knew it wouldn't do any good. Also, that it wasn't necessary: the death of Jesus earned salvation for all. Nothing needs to be or can be added to his atoning work.

Yes, Jesus *earned* salvation for all; but not everyone acknowledges and takes advantage of it. And that's the problem. You see, to be saved, to stand in the presence of God unashamed and without fear of judgment, requires absolute righteousness. We're talking about sinless perfection here. With the holy God the wicked (that is to say, anyone who sins even once) *cannot* dwell. So, the question is: how does one attain such righteousness?

The Scriptures provide two starkly different answers. And this is where today's Epistle picks up. Paul says, "Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them." That's simple enough: one way to be righteous before God is to perfectly obey all of his commandments. If you never commit a sin, if you never even once disobey one of God's laws, then you *are* righteous. You have done what he requires of you. And on account of that, he has no reason to condemn you. You shall live not just in time, but also in glory forever. You did it. Great job! Good for you!

Now, sitting here listening to that way of attaining righteousness with your Lutheran ears, you sense the problem right away. But the Jews back then (and even today) weren't listening with Lutheran ears; they were listening with Jewish ears. And after all, they were God's chosen people. And why did God choose them? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? It's because we're better than everyone else. God chose us and gave us his commandments at Mount Sinai through Moses because he knew that we were the one people on the planet whom he could trust to keep them. It wouldn't make sense for him to give us his commandments if we couldn't keep them, would it? And we think we're doing a very good job of it. So, when the Lord sends us his promised Messiah, he's not going to be a Savior from sin. Who needs that? Not us. No, the Lord is going to send us a Messiah who will give us the reward we have longed deserved and have thus far been deprived of.

This is the attitude that prevailed among the Jews. And it explains why as a rule they rejected the truth of the Christian Gospel. It's odd, though: if they'd only read and considered what actually happened when God gave their forefathers the Law at Sinai, they might have seen it differently. Recall that when the Lord came down on the mountain, they stood there trembling in terror. They couldn't even touch or come near to the mountain. To do so meant instant death. And when the Lord began to speak his Law into their ears, they begged Moses to make the Lord stop. "His words are killing us", they complained "If he keeps on speaking, we will all die!"

This was precisely the point the Lord was trying to get across: his Word of Law is death to sinners. Like Sinai itself, it was out of their reach, an unattainable goal, a mountain that cannot be climbed. It was in a sense a distant Word of God – a Word that kept them far apart from him. That's the lesson they were supposed to have learned. That the way of righteousness that comes from the Law is a dead end. You can't do it. Give it up. Look for another way.

It's this other way that Paul turns to next in his letter; it's the righteousness that is based on faith. This righteousness says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (As if you could reach those lofty heights on your own.) "Or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (As if you could conquer death with you own power and strength.) No. These things are out of reach, impossibly far away. But what does it say? "The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart."

This is a very different Word of God. It's not distant. It's close. It's actually within you; in your heart and in your mind. It spills out of your mouth when you speak. And it's not frightening. It doesn't kill. No, it actually gives life to those conceived and born in sin.

This Word, Paul says, is the Word of faith that he and the other evangelists proclaim: first that Jesus is Lord. And that doesn't simply mean that he's the boss and needs to be obeyed. No, it means that he's the Lord God of the Old Testament who saved his people from bondage, who provided and cared for them in the wilderness, and who delivered to them the Promised Land. He did this for ancient Israel as a prophetic picture of the greater salvation he would achieve for all nations and races as he rescues them from the bondage of sin and death, provides and cares for them in the wilderness of this age, and ultimately delivers to them the eternal Promised Land. This very human man Jesus, whose name means "the Lord saves", is the Lord God who saves.

The second thing this Word of faith says is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Of course, in order to be raised from the dead means that he would first have to die. So the death of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world is part of this Word of faith. Paul is using a little shorthand here. But it's significant that he emphasizes the resurrection. Jesus is put to death for sin, yes; but he is raised for our *justification*; that is to say, for our *righteousness*. The resurrection is the proof that on the cross Jesus completed the just payment for sins of the whole world. If even one sin were not atoned for, he could not have risen. So the resurrection testifies to the truth that in Jesus the Law of God has been completely satisfied. In him righteousness has been reestablished not in your keeping of the Law but in his keeping it for you. This righteousness is yours through faith in him. As Paul says, "For with the heart one believes and is justified (that is, counted righteous), and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

And this is true for everyone, for Jews and Gentiles alike. The same Lord is Lord of all. Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame in the courtroom of divine justice. But those who don't believe in him, who are still trying to achieve righteousness on their own by keeping the Law will be. And that's why Paul keeps on preaching Christ to both Jews and Gentiles; keeps preaching despite the hardships and suffering it's caused him; keeps preaching in the face of sometimes violent opposition. He knows that faith comes by hearing the Word of faith he proclaims. Preaching Christ crucified, proclaiming Christ raised from the dead, teaching what this means for sinners and their salvation, are what puts this near Word of God in people's hearts and mouths so that they will be saved. So, this is Paul's solution to the problematic question of the Jews: to keep on proclaiming Christ.

And this is the answer to the other questions for us raised by it. In Christ, God isn't rejecting anyone. In Christ, God is always for us. So, how can I be sure I won't be rejected at some point in the future? Simple: by continuing to hear the Word of faith that Paul proclaimed.

A final thought in closing: this Word of faith that Paul is referring to is more than a message. It's not just information being communicated in spoken or written form. No, Scripture is clear on this point: the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God who became our brother in flesh to save us in the man Christ Jesus, is the Word. My confirmation students learn very quickly that this is one of the best ways to really get under my skin: I'll ask, "Where is Jesus?" And they'll reply, "He's in my heart." I hate that. Not because it isn't true. It is. The problem is what they mean when they say it. They pick it up somewhere along the line that Jesus lives within them in some sort of warm, fuzzy feeling, esoteric way (though they don't actually use the word "esoteric"). It's like in that old, very non-Lutheran hymn called *He Lives*. The refrain goes:

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way
He lives, He lives, Salvation to impart

You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.

Ugh! No, that is not how you know he lives. You know he lives because of the Word of faith that is proclaimed into your ears. He lives in you *in* that very Word of faith that you hear and believe and confess. The Word that is near you, in your heart and mouth, is Jesus in you. His presence is not experienced in a fuzzy feeling. He is present in real words with real meaning. Holding to them, you hold to Christ. And in holding to him, like Peter in today's Gospel, you are saved. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!