

Romans 12:9-21 Our Christian Witness

In the matter of only a few months we have witnessed one disaster after another in the UK: in Manchester, in London and in the election result (in the sense it has produced an unstable government.) And this week the catastrophic fire at the Grenfell Tower. The Queen summed the mood of the nation as “very sombre.”

These disaster are a sign of a nation under judgment (Joshua 24:20). Deuteronomy 32:35, *It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.* This is interesting because Paul quotes this text in today’s passage (Romans 12:19). What is heartening though is that despite terrible tragedy this week we have also witnessed an outpouring of love and generosity, a true picture of human nature created in the image of God. Love and goodness it seems is not dead. What has been even more encouraging has been to see Christians at the heart of this volunteer response.

Romans 12 is concerned with the witness of the believing remnant, whom I have been arguing were living in close contact with unbelieving Jews, essentially still part of the synagogue. Starting a new religion was illegal in the Roman Empire and the Christians benefited from being under the covering of the synagogue structure. So how should they live in relation to their unbelieving brethren? Paul gives a set of exhortations which can be loosely grouped into two sets (vs10-13 and vs14-21). However he begins with a general exhortation to love: *love must be sincere, abhor what is evil, cleave to that which is good.*

This is the agape (self-giving) love of God, which Paul has talked about a lot already in Romans (Romans 5:5, 5:8, 8:39.) As we know the love God has for us so we will be enabled to love others who are also loved by Him. Judas perhaps is the biblical archetype of insincere love, as he betrayed Judas with a kiss. If we love God we will love what he loves, and hate what he hates, which is sin, remembering that through God hates the sin he loves the sinner. And we will cleave to the good, which ultimately is God (Psalm 63:8).

1. vs10-13 exhortations to believers in their relationship with other believers

Love one another with brotherly affection (Romans 12:10). The love of God when expressed in Christian communities becomes a powerful witness to Jesus: *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another* (John 13:35). *In honour preferring one another* – this is not pretending or flattery, but it is putting the needs of others first and giving honour where honour is due (Romans 13:7).

In vs11-12 Paul gives four exhortation which have to do with our spiritual life. They act like a spiritual thermometer to measure our spiritual temperature. Are we slothful in our spiritual life, lazy in prayer or Bible study? If so we are spiritually cold. Or are we *fervent in spirit, serving the Lord*? If so, then we are hot. Do we have a real sense of Christian hope? Do we really believe God is good? If so, this will enable us to *rejoice in tribulation*. We usually rejoice when we are free from tribulation! But for Paul they go together (Romans 5:3-5) and actually this is evidence of a real and substantial hope.

We have three further exhortation, which remind me of the early church: *continuing instant in prayer; Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality*. The Jerusalem church (in Acts) continued instant in prayer (Acts 1:14, 2:42), distributed to the needs of the saints (Acts 6:1ff) and showed hospitality as they met in each other’s homes breaking bread with glad and sincere hearts, and praising God – an example to follow.

2. vs14-21 exhortations to believers in their relationship with non-believers

In this second set of exhortation we see that the believing community were probably experiencing problems from the non-believing community, as Paul counsels them, *Bless them which persecute you; bless and curse not* (Romans 12:14). *To persecute* means literally *to pursue*, and sometimes this is used in a positive sense, for example, *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding* (Romans 14:19). To be persecuted is to be pursued and harassed in some way. But as Christians we are to pursue peace, and this is Paul's emphasis in this passage. It goes against our natural inclinations, which is to curse those who persecute us. We are inclined to rejoice when our enemies weep, and weep when our enemies rejoice. But Paul exhorts us: *Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep* (Romans 12:15). And, *live in harmony with one another*. In context I think this probably refers to relations with the unbelieving Jewish community, even though Christian unity is also vital. In Romans 12:16 Paul exhorts the Romans believers not to be proud but to associate with those of low position, we might say lower classes. While it's not clear to me what the background is to this exhortation, it is true in the church our equality is based not in education or wealth or social status (sometimes called 'equality of outcome'), but it is based on the fact God loves each individual so much that Christ died for each one. All this teaching is quite radical when we think about it!

All this reminds us of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: *Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:43-44). We should remind ourselves that Jesus was not articulating a new law, but interpreting the Mosaic law (Torah) in what was largely a new and radical way, as Messiah. In this way it is called the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). Nowhere in the Scriptures does it say, "Hate your enemy." Rather Jesus was contradicting a popular saying among the Zealots (and others as well), "Love your neighbour (Jews), but hate your enemy (Romans)." In fact the Scriptures clearly point towards Jesus' interpretation, for example, *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles* (Proverbs 24:17). This is interesting because it was the Jewish non-believers who were *stumbling*.

Paul continues, *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. As far as it depends on us we are to live peacefully with all. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* (Romans 12:17-10).

Again, our inclination is to get our pound of flesh, to get our revenge. Again, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person* (Matthew 5:38-39). The problem was that in Jesus' day *the eye for an eye* Scripture was being misinterpreted to mean that revenge was ok. But this verse refers to the judicial process, and basically meant that the punishment should fit the crime. The sages of Israel didn't apply it literally. We cannot take the law into our own hands, and in our personal relationships we should not resist an evil person. However there can be situations which have to be sorted out through the courts.

I do not believe these verses (including the Sermon on the Mount) amount to a call to pacifism, and I conclude (reluctantly) that there is a place for the 'just war'. However these verses are most certainly for individual Christians and for the Christian community, and when lived out will be a tremendous testimony to Christ whether the non-believing community responds or not.