

Romans 11: 1-2a; 29-32

Sermon by Wes Campbell

I ask then, has God rejected his people?'

We have just read from chapter eleven of Paul's letter to the Romans.

When we theological students studied the letter in the 1970s, we were given only chapters 1-8 to read. It was as if the rest of the letter had not been written. I have wondered about that. Some think this letter was Paul's way of introducing himself to a congregation in Rome; he hadn't been there, so this was a summary of his teaching. So, chapters 1 to 8 seem to do the trick. Or the choice might have been influenced by Martin Luther's discovery of the gospel of grace in the early chapters of the letter. So we would read the first eight chapters of the letter as an unfolding of an intensely personal faith.

Whatever the reason, when we come to chapter nine, the letter strikes an entirely different note.

Paul launches into a searching questioning about the place of the Jews. In chapters nine to eleven, backwards and forwards, he wrestles with the question of his people's future.

This is no personal and private matter. Paul wrestles with the fate of his own people.

He steps into a hotly contested arena we still find difficult. We hardly know how to ask about the Jews because of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

We hardly know how to speak because of the death camps, Auschwitz one of many, and the church's long history of anti-Judaism.

Some of you may remember an American TV series called *Holocaust*, screened in the 1970s. It told, as I recall, the story of a German officer who administered a death camp during the day, then went home to his family to listen to classical music in the evenings.

When it screened in Germany a torrent of questioning was unleashed. What had Christian Germany done?

The horror of those Nazi camps has led to church re-examination of the deep rooted anti-Judaism which named Jews 'Christ-killers', and consigned them to gassing, starvation and to death.

This destroyed the faith of many Jewish people. Others accuse the God that would allow such murder. And yet others put their trust in a State of Israel that arms itself and builds a protective wall.

So, Paul: 'I ask then, has God rejected his people?'

Too many Christians answer 'Yes'. If Jesus is the Christ, this disqualifies Jews who do not accept him as the Messiah!

For other Christians the state of Israel fits into a Zionist history: the State of Israel is an integral part of a divine plan; creating that state in the 'Holy Land' will bring on the end times. I suspect that this argument won't satisfy many here!

But when we try to put our minds to a Jewish future, with the pressing plight of the Palestinians, the question of justice seems to block out theological considerations. They sound too fanciful – or, too

ideological. After all, it can be said, the State of Israel was created out of a mix of western guilt and guerrilla resistance.

Can we stay with Paul as he asks ‘Has God rejected the Jews?’

Can we ask that question of *God*? That is hard for us, shaped as we are by modern habits of thinking: we are the movers of history and makers of human events. But here Paul asks ‘*Has God...?*’

And with that he turns a full 180 degrees from the way we normally see the world. He takes us to *God*. And into *God*’s story with the world.

Here the question matters ‘*Has God rejected...?*’

After all, Paul knows Israel’s scriptures which tell the story of humanity who *turned away* from *God*. And, beyond that, the first half of his letter is a full-throated, unrestrained cry, celebrating how *God has turned toward* humanity.

This is no cool theological treatise. This is Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, in serious discussion with the congregation in Rome. Some would say that he is dealing with emerging Gentile Christian congregations who are now meeting separately from the synagogue. When Paul was writing, Jews and Christians had not yet formally separated; that formal separation happened in the AD70s when, by decision of a Jewish council, followers of Jesus were excluded from the synagogue. But it does seem that Paul is dealing with the emerging Gentile congregation that is now separate from the synagogue.

Paul addresses Gentiles who have heard his message of liberty, who know they are welcomed by the God of Israel, but now see themselves as superior to Jews.

Paul must be writing to a situation that knows the heat and hurt of division – we Uniting Church people know that well enough. In Rome, about 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the long history of separation of Jew and Gentile (in the church!) begins. The division, anger and hurt had its origins in the very message that Paul himself preached. Liberated from law, relieved of the need to circumcise, free from strict food regulations, Gentiles are now grafted into Abraham’s family tree: through Jesus the Jew.

But Paul’s fierce advocacy for including Gentiles has turned against the brothers and sisters of Jesus himself. The welcome of the nations seems to exclude his Jewish family. ‘Has God rejected his people?’

For this question, Paul has the strongest possible answer: NO! No, indeed, the Jews are not rejected!

Yet he does not down play the Jewish ‘NO’ to Jesus.

There is a basic breakdown. Gentiles are recognising Jesus as the Messiah the Jewish people were expecting; but now Jewish people do not accept him.

The Gentile ‘YES’ is contrasted to the Jewish ‘NO’. The Jewish ‘NO’ is set against the Gentile ‘YES’.

That poses a question. Are non-Jews, Gentiles, Goy, people of the nations – that’s us – to congratulate ourselves on our superior insight, our wise recognition of Jesus? And, with that, our freedom from circumcision, food restrictions and dress codes?

To deal with this question, Paul returns to the theme of the first chapters of his letter. ”*All were disobedient.*” *All* had turned from *God*. So, *Gentile Christians* have no grounds for superior attitudes. *We* too were disobedient. *God* has also turned toward the Gentiles, and so included them - us. This is possible only by the mercy of *God*. Quote: ‘*God has imprisoned all in disobedience that he may be merciful to all.*’ (11:32)

Why have the Jews not accepted Jesus? Paul's answer is that here *God* has acted to 'harden' their response.

This is a favourite biblical attitude: *God* hardens hearts and provokes opposition, in order to move the story forward, on to something new. The Pharaoh who opposed Moses had his heart hardened by God. This is the same God who hears the cries of oppressed slaves – Joseph's descendants - and can break human hearts, moving us to pity. The point is: no part of our human story is separate from God's intention, even when it has to do with human attitudes locked into law, unable to change.

But now, most perplexing - it is God's own people who are hardened – against even God's chosen one. Where can this possibly lead? Does it lead God to join those who oppose the Jews, who build the death camps? By no means! Even in the face of the Jewish 'NO', God refuses to turn against them. God will not forget the promise made to Abraham; God who made the promise, will also keep it.

For Paul it is clear: the *God of the Jews* has been responsible for his message to the Gentiles. The God of the Jews has sent out the good news *to all the nations*, and they have begun to respond.

And *this same God* holds to the promise to the Jews: at the end, says Paul, the fact that Gentiles have turned to God will make the Jews jealous, and will also lead them to turn.

This is Paul's hope: hope grounded in the promise of God.

It is grounded firmly in the conviction that in Jesus Christ all nations are welcomed by God: Quote: '*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all, and generous to those who call on him.*' (10:12)

Being who we are, we will probably want a map of the future; we will want to know the mechanics of this process. But that is not what we are asked for.

This letter has asked a question of God. Can God be expected to keep promises? The answer given is a *double yes*.

One: the promises are kept to those who, like us, are latecomers to the God of Israel. Because of Jesus Christ, we are given the right to claim God's mercy toward us.

And two, the promise will be kept to the Jewish people: they remain God's people.

That means there is a double witness to God in the world: *one*: in the *church*, and *two*: in the Jewish people *as the people of God*.

For many centuries, this argument has been lop-sided. It seemed that, with Christendom, the Gentile church had won. And Jews were an irritant, non-citizens, on the edge of that 'Christian society'. There are the roots of those death camps for Jews; and for all who do not 'fit': the unwanted foetus, the disabled, the homosexuals, the dissenters, the enemy.

That *Christian society* is now crumbling; thank God, and the church is now returned to the edge, an irritant, a question to those with power, with the Jews; we are now called into company with those who trust the promise of God for their life; and for our shared future – the future of the world itself.

So, the question is not whether *God* will keep promises, but whether *we will let ourselves* be shaped by the promise of God, who makes the promise in mercy.

That makes the question of justice all the more pressing.

And as always, this comes with the reminder that the promise brings its own cost.

Remember, when Paul was writing this letter, persecution was a practical reality for Jews and Christians alike.

That is why in chapter 12 the following instruction is also necessary:

‘Let love be genuine: hate what is evil, hold fast to that which is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in the spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12: 9-12, 21)

It is the mystery of God that makes this possible: the God who has turned toward all in Jesus Messiah, and calls us with a promise, Jew and Gentile alike.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgements and how inscrutable his ways. ... For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. AMEN