



24 April 2016
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 61 vv. 1–4
Romans 8 vv. 1–6

My Favourite Book of the Bible

Romans: a bombshell to challenge dictators, rebuild societies, and heal sick souls

By The Rev'd Canon Vernon White
Canon Theologian, Westminster Abbey

An extraordinary thing happened in Europe in the years following the second world war. Germany, the defeated nation, lay in ruins. Its industry and economy was shattered. 80% of its historic buildings were destroyed. 7.5 million Germans lay dead. Countless others were displaced, hungry and homeless, and divided from each other by the different occupying forces. It lay in moral ruins too. Its people were faced not just with the horrors war had inflicted on them, but the dawning realization of the even more terrible horrors that had been inflicted on others in their name. So they had to cope with shame, disgrace, failure, as well as physical destruction. The extraordinary thing that happened was their recovery. The people of Germany rebuilt both their country and economy, *and* their self-worth. Unlike the aftermath of the 1WW left by the Versailles treaty, they did not sink into either self-loathing and paralysis, or bitterness and vengeance. Instead, without evading the truth, they have largely faced it and recovered, with honour. They were reborn.

There were, no doubt, many reasons for this miracle. The resilience and discipline and moral maturity of the German people themselves. The political and economic aid initiative of America and its allies known as the Marshall Plan - a creative political act of both moral and pragmatic generosity. And perhaps something else as well. Something below the radar, shaping their people and politics at unconscious as well as conscious levels: there was a pervasive preaching and teaching of a central truth of the Christian Gospel.

One main inspiration for this was a German speaking Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who himself had been expelled from Germany by the Nazis at the outset of the war. His central message? Simply this: '*reconciliation precedes redemption*'. In other words, the only way to redeem such a situation, heal it, move it on, is not first by accusation and retribution, but by taking the risk of reconciliation: by an offer of forgiveness, trust, acceptance. Not at the expense of judgement and truth, any more than the truth and reconciliation commission in post apartheid South Africa ignored truth, but by creating a climate of trust in which all could face the truth, rather than be crushed by it. It was this hidden Christian seed of reconciliation sown in the ground of such devastation which, some think, was the deepest dynamic of that post-war miracle.

I say the main inspiration was the theologian Karl Barth. But of course lying behind him was the primary source of Christ himself: and, specifically, Christ conveyed in St Paul's letter to the Romans. '*Reconciliation before redemption*' is above all a central message of Romans. A book and message which had already had huge effect in western history and thought: it helped convert St Augustine in the 4th century; it galvanised Luther to launch the Reformation a thousand years later; two centuries after that, it stirred John Wesley's heart so much the great Methodist movement was born; and then shaped this message of Karl Barth in the 20th century. Barth's early work on Romans was so striking it was described as a bombshell falling in the playground of the theologians (and politicians). His mature work? Precisely this message of reconciliation.

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And so that is the main reason I have chosen Romans for this sermon series. There are other ways of reading the letter. Other themes in it. There are so-called ‘new perspectives’ on Paul, as anyone studying theology will know. That’s part *of* its complexity and genius. But it is this notion of reconciliation preceding redemption, generosity preceding and precipitating change, not just following it, that I especially want to place before you tonight.

It was focussed at the heart of the letter in that pivotal ringing declaration we heard in the opening verse of the second reading. ‘There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’. A declaration which leads to being ‘set free’ for redemption; free *from* what Paul calls the ‘law of sin and death’, and free *for* what he calls ‘life in the Spirit’. The first part of the letter provided the basis for it: the event of Christ, which is the pre-eminent initiative of reconciliation, generosity, mercy, acceptance. The second part of the letter then unfolds its outcome: redemption at work in healing broken relationships and societies; reconciling different peoples. Isaiah anticipated it in our first reading. The announcement of *good* news will ‘liberate’, ‘heal the broken-hearted’, even ‘repair ruined cities’.

Is this realistic? Is it realistic to think that the offer of reconciliation can precipitate redemption? It is. Certainly at a personal level. When a child feels they have failed or feels guilty, what really helps most? Just judgement? Unlikely. Judgement alone, however necessary, risks only the self-loathing and hate which feeds a vicious circle. But generosity, the word of mercy, better still the action which demonstrates trust, that’s what will show the child that it’s still wanted, what will enable the child to try again, and try better. When adults are scarred with a sense of failure, much the same. Philip Toynbee’s remarkable diary *The End of a Journey* charts a lifetime of feeling fear and failure. But one of his last entries tells how he was released from it. It came when he heard exactly those words: ‘there is no condemnation’. And he recounts the power it gave him. ‘Shriven at last’ he writes ‘and *therefore* able to love you all the more than I ever have!’. The two things are indissolubly linked. Acceptance frees. Frees from the self-preoccupation of failure, for love. Reconciliation leads to redemption!

And yes, it even works at a political level too. Of course not easily or always. In the real world of politics, in personal relationships too for that matter, acts of generosity and mercy will sometimes simply be trampled over. Realism tells us that. It’s called sin. And that’s the risk of reconciliation. Yet isn’t the deeper realism also that reconciliation will still be needed at some point? In every situation of conflict - in Germany, South Africa, Ireland, Palestine, in national politics, or in our personal life - it is a matter of fact that some initiative of creative generosity at some point has been necessary to shift the situation. Only that has the power to do so.

And that is this message of Romans. The initiative of reconciliation is an ultimate *power* of the universe, its deepest grain, because reconciliation is in the end the power of *God* – ‘the power of God unto salvation’, in St Paul’s words. So even when knocked back, trampled on, it will endure. A miracle waiting to happen again and again. That’s what Romans invites us to believe, to share - and to try to live out.