

Bible Readings

Isaiah 51:1-6

51 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the Lord:

look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

² Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him.

³ For the Lord comforts Zion;
he comforts all her waste places
and makes her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

⁴ "Give attention to me, my people,
and give ear to me, my nation;
for a law will go out from me,
and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.

⁵ My righteousness draws near,
my salvation has gone out,
and my arms will judge the peoples;
the coastlands hope for me,
and for my arm they wait.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and they who dwell in it will die in like manner;
but my salvation will be forever,
and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

Romans 11: 25-31

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

"The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";

²⁷ "and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins."

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.

Sermon

Children of one Father

Last Sunday, we looked at the last chapter of the book Jonah, which ended with an extremely unhappy Jonah. Why...? Because God had forgiven the people of Nineveh. Jonah was so angry that he wanted to die.

What lies at the heart of this anger is jealousy; rivalry, competition.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book, "Not in God's Name", speaks about rivalry. He explains how in human nature mimetic desire is deeply embedded and how that creates room for resentment.

A child is given a toy, another child sees it and discovers they want it too. They did not want it, until seeing someone else has it. That is not only so with children. Adults want what other adults have and retail media makes the most of this human characteristic. They show in the most attractive way that someone has what they want to sell, in order to trigger the consumer's desire to want it too.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out what this can lead to, "Mimetic desire is not just wanting to *have* what someone else has. Ultimately it is *to be* what someone else is. "Desiring 'this man's art, and that man's scope', we wish we were them"...Often it leads to violence, because if I want what you have, sooner or later we will fight.

We have sibling rivalry in the first book of the bible, Genesis.

The two brothers Cain and Abel. Most of us know how that brotherhood ended: Cain killed Abel because Cain was jealous.

We have Jacob and Esau. Jacob stole the birthright of his elder brother Esau in a very clever way. Esau realised later what had happened and wanted to take revenge on Jacob.

And then of course Joseph, the favourite of his father Jacob, triggering jealousy in his brothers with his colourful robe.

The power of sibling rivalry is more present and more profound in life than we may be aware of. It shapes behaviour of humans towards each other.

Not only in humans, we see it in other species, beautifully shown in David Attenborough's how animals fight in order to survive as food supplies are scarce.

It is against the background of precisely this rivalry that we need to understand the difficult passage of Paul.

Paul is a Jew. His original name was Saul.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9)

A life changing meeting with Jesus. After this unexpected, mind-blowing encounter, Saul was no longer the same. With that change, Saul's name changed into Paul. When he was given his physical sight back, he saw in a new spiritually way. Paul began to see God as He had shown Himself to the world in and through Christ. With that new, the most profound life changing insight, a new mission was given to Paul: a mission amongst the gentiles.

In our New Testament passage Paul makes the gentiles aware of God's mystery. He himself had experienced it firsthand.

We all know that God works in mysterious ways. It is said so often. It is experienced at different times and in different ways by those who believe in this mysterious God.

In the light of the Lord's mystery, Paul says,

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Roman 11:25)

A partial hardening has come upon Israel....Remember, when Paul was still Saul, his heart was hardened. But God intervened by "arresting" Saul when he was on his way to Damascus with the mission he thought he had: to bring followers of Jesus bound to Jerusalem.

Paul belonged to Israel. He was a pharisee. There was nothing that he did not now about the Torah; God's commandments.

Jonah symbolises Israel. This implies his deep knowledge of God's character. Jonah knew; he anticipated that God was going to be gracious to the people of Nineveh and that anticipation made that he tried to run away from God's presence. Jonah's hardheartedness is shown in his choice to follow the way to death rather than follow God.

How does that partial hardheartedness of Israel sit in God's mystery?

Paul being Paul, explains in a complicated way how Jews and gentiles (non-Jews) relate to each other. Simply said it is this: God gives His grace to so many gentiles that Israel becomes jealous.

So, we are back at the rivalry as it is embedded in human nature, as Jonathan Sacks has it. Rivalry, jealousy produces anger, just as we have it in Jonah.

Paul seems to say that this state of affair, the partial hardening of Israel, lasts as long as not all gentiles have come together. As long as not all gentiles have merged with the offspring of the father of faith, Abraham. That is the offspring of Abraham that is defined by Abraham's belief and trust in God.

It is that coming together that creates room for the triggering of jealousy in the Jews: jealousy for the grace as it is given by God through Christ; for the effects it has on a life defined by redemption through Christ.

But there is another side to it with regards to the believing gentiles: there is a potential for arrogance. Christians can think they have more or are more than the Jews: we are saved, you are not.

That is what Paul warns the gentiles, including us, for. Hence, he says,

...as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:28,29)

While this seems to divide the elected from the adopted as Ephesians 1:5 has it:

"He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will",

God's righteousness eliminates that distinction, for His blessings are given to and therefore shared by both. *All* are children of the one Father so...no sibling rivalry! All are children of Him who called Abraham to leave his country and to fully trust Him, who promised,

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. (Genesis 22:17)