

Today's sermon topic considers the situation of Israel and the Jewish people in the economy of God. To some this may not seem too important but in fact it is a vitally important topic revealing some critical aspects of how we should see the world and understand how God works.

We begin by recognising, as the theologian Albert Schweitzer observed, that Jesus was a Jew. At the beginning of the 20th century, Schweitzer, in his quest for discovering the authentic Jesus, ignored the current dogmas of the Church and insisted on the importance of the Jewish apocalyptic background. The imminent coming of the Kingdom of God he believed is the key *"to the enigma of the thought of Jesus"*. Since this time serious theologians have recognised that to understand the Christian faith it is necessary to have some understanding of Jewish belief, struggles, understandings, culture and place of the Hebrew people in God's economy. You will all be aware that the Old Testament is essentially the Jewish writings that are essentially unchanged from what Judaism uses today ... although there are other texts, interpretations and oral traditions that are important to the various Jewish main and sub-cultures as well. The Scriptures that Jesus grew up knowing were the Scriptures of the Old Testament or as some call today, the First Covenant. Jesus' first languages were Hebrew and Aramaic. He likely spoke Greek as He interacted with non-Jewish people regularly and Greek was the common language of the day. It is also possible He knew and spoke some Latin but that is less certain. How Jesus spoke into His world however needs something more of the nuancing that theologian Tom Wright argues for than a simplistic one-lens view such as Schweitzer's "end-of -the-world" apocalyptic. There can be no doubt that Jesus interpreted human history through the eyes of God with true wisdom. Events were critiqued for their theological significance and consequence and lessons drawn from these.

We could take a simple and blatant example of this. In Luke 13:2-5 Jesus asks His audience, **"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** Normally however, Jesus wasn't so blatant. More commonly He engages His wider audience with parables and challenges to engage them more fully and stimulate people's theological reflection. Hence people such as Nicodemus could observe the things Jesus did and reflect that He must have been sent by God. Jesus' life, thought and actions grew from a Jewish context but, as we know, Jesus did not limit His mission to the Jewish people alone but to all who would come to Him – Jews, Samaritans, even Roman centurions, outcasts such as lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes.

Jesus knew that His primary mission on earth was to the Jewish people but that His mission would broaden. The case of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Matthew 15:21ff is a good case in point. A woman with a possessed daughter came to Jesus begging for help and He apparently ignored her and the disciples wanted her sent away. Jesus turned to her and said, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."** But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, **"Lord, help me!"** And He answered and said, **"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."** But she said, **"Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."** Then Jesus said to her, **"O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish."** And her daughter was healed at once. Now at face value this seems a disturbing account; the disciples and even Jesus seemingly heartless. Jesus' focus on only Israel and His comment about feeding

crumbs to dogs seems unsettling. Yet then Jesus frees the woman's daughter from her bondage. What was going on here?

In small actions and large Jesus repeatedly was testing and training not only His disciples but all who came to Him. From the start, the woman's cry of "Lord", indicated she had some degree of faith in Jesus. Her willing submission and humility of behalf of her daughter, even acceptance of humiliation before the disciples, speaks volumes about her character and need. But greatest of all was her faith, her belief in Jesus. Ignore the fact Jesus was a Jew, that He was seated with a large group of men, that she was distained and distanced, that she was a person of little stature or worth in their eyes: she believed in Jesus and Jesus knew it. What Jesus does is three-fold here.

Firstly, Jesus clearly identifies that His mission is to do with Israel and the Jewish people. Why? Because He is the Messiah. The promised One of God. He will bring redemption to the world, why? Because of God's covenantal love promised to Abraham and various Jewish leaders after him. The Abrahamic Covenant was straightforward. From Genesis 12:1-3: **"The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** Jesus' mission then is first of all to the Jewish people, the people of the Promise. But the whole purpose of setting up a chosen people was to demonstrate to the world how good and pleasant it is when people dwell in the love and presence of God in faithful obedience. That nation would be a light to the world so that all could come into the presence and love of God. As Isaiah depicts of Zion in 60:1-4, **"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."** This is something understood by the Hebrew people. The celebrated Menorah, the emblem of Israel, is a symbol of light. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a 2010 address, stated that Israel was a **"proud people with a magnificent country and one which always aspires to serve as 'Light Unto the Nations'"**. But as Israel had failed so miserably in this task the Messiah was sent to fulfil and take over the task personally. In this context then we can read Isaiah 42 with some understanding. **"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and He will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smouldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth. In His teaching the islands will put their hope."** This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: **"I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness; I will take hold of Your hand. I will keep You and will make You to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."** Jesus understood this. It was this passage that he referred John the Baptist to when he questioned Jesus from prison. Jesus mission is firstly to and for the Jewish people according to the covenants but ultimately, He will bring healing to all of the world.

Secondly, Jesus demonstrates that faith will be a critical key to the door of the Kingdom of God. We will come back to this shortly in understanding how the apostle Paul then applies this in Romans.

Thirdly, Jesus acts with compassion. He knows and has articulated what the Jewish world thinks of this desperate woman. Sadly, His disciples have not shown any compassion, in fact

the opposite. Jesus shames them by responding to her, encouraging her in her faith and healing her daughter from that very moment. Where were the disciples providing light for someone in need? Where was their witness to God's love and mercy to those who call on Him? When it was needed it wasn't there. Was it because she was a woman? Because she wasn't Jewish? Because she was poor or desperate? The disciples still had some way to go. Only the woman had recognised how great a table it was they sat at and who Jesus really is.

So, we turn now to Paul more specifically as we continue our Romans theme in chapter 9. Paul is virtually at his wits end. Some commentators have even described him as depressed in this period as he writes these chapters. The cause? Paul considers the state of his own Jewish people.

In the aftermath of Jesus' death, the disciples had been discouraged, disheartened and at a loss where to turn. Jesus resurrection changed all that. The disciples were repurposed with a mission to take Good News into the world. At Pentecost they were equipped in a new way by the active presence and gifting of the Holy Spirit to be able to carry out their task. But sadly, many of their Jewish brethren refused to listen to the Good News of Jesus. In fact, some of them became violent opponents of any teaching in Jesus' Name. Paul knew only too well. Until he had encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road he too had been one of these. In fact, Paul had become one of Jesus most vehement opponents. Acts 8:1 tells us that Paul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death. In Galatians 1:13 Paul states in his own words, **"For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it ..."** Until of course Paul met with Jesus and his life changed from that moment.

Now in Romans 9 Paul looks at his own race, the Jewish people, and is filled with despair. How could they have rejected, even killed, their own Messiah. And now that Jesus has risen from the dead, why do they still continue in this hard-hearted rebellion against their Messiah? So genuine, plaintive and heart-felt is his distress he cries, **"I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel."** Sometimes we feel like this or someone we know or love has not responded to the gospel, to Jesus. "Why Lord?", we cry, "Why?"

Paul observes that the Jewish people have so many great benefits that God has bestowed upon them that seem to have been taken for granted. **"There is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the Temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised."** How is it with so many blessings and benefits so many Jewish people could reject Jesus, the promised Messiah, who they have been waiting for, for centuries? The promises of God and the covenants were there. The Scriptures, the Law, the prophecies, the Temple worship ... everything that should have highlighted who Jesus is ... but they missed it all. Why?

Paul now turns to develop something that Jesus had pointed out to the Pharisees, Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law in debate (John 8:31ff) and on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (see Matthew 21:1–11, Mark 11:1–11, Luke 19:28–44). In essence, the children of God are those who do God's will. Biological descent is not a guarantee of salvation. We know this story in so many ways in our world today – the presumption of privilege because of family and position is one fast disappearing in society and for good reason. It has so often been abused. It looks like God takes the same approach. In John 8 we see Jesus telling the Pharisees that were challenging and opposing Him that they were illegitimate children, not of God, but of their father the devil and their works exposed them.

The non-biological argument for salvation is furthered as Paul addresses the issue of Abraham's children. Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael, as we heard previously, ended up taking two very different paths in life. Isaac was the son of promise, the one whom through God's Chosen People would be numbered. In contrast his brother Ishmael, while also to become the father of nations, arguably the Arabic nations, would not be numbered amongst

the Chosen People. Is this fair? Wrong question. As Paul continues to argue, God's purposes require that people's situations will be different in furthering His plan but this doesn't mean their salvation is pre-determined. An individual's response in line with what they know, as Paul has already argued at the start of Romans, is the critical factor. Even for the Chosen People individual salvation is determined in terms of faith. We will talk about who God's Children of Promise are next week.

What Paul does reveal however is that God is faithful to His promise and covenant with the Jewish people. As we have seen throughout thousands of years of history already God always has a faithful remnant of Jewish people who live trusting in God's promises and living rightly. What Paul does observe is that even these have not been able to achieve salvation by works. The Law is too hard, too impossible to live by perfectly. Yet, paradoxically, a remnant will still be saved. How will this happen? Right through history Satan has tried to destroy God's Chosen People or tempt them off path and away from God. The prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 18 complained to the people that he was the only prophet left. But he didn't know God had reserved thousands who had not bowed the knee to the Baals. Through the later life of the early Church through the Middle Ages, the Crusades and multiple pogroms, even into recent history the Jewish people have been the target of suspicion, racism, unfair treatment, hatred, segregation and worse culminating publicly in the extremes of the Nazi Holocaust. Even today anti-Semitism is a scourge in world that is on the rise in many countries. Many are ignorant of the curse they bring upon themselves in line with the Abrahamic Covenant noted before. Throughout this God has always kept a faithful remnant and always will because of His covenant. As Christians we are called to pray for and support our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Paul ends what we call chapter 9 with a paradox. A faithful remnant will be saved but for many Jesus will become a stumbling stone. Works will not save but what about Jesus? Who are the Children of Promise and what today of the Covenants?

We will continue next week ...