

Israel and the Gaza Strip have been so much in the news and in our prayers these last weeks. Here in Romans 11 we have a glimpse of Paul wrestling with the question of Israel. His certainty that one day his people will see and respond to God's plan in Christ.

It's a few years since I did my ministry training at the Theological Hall in Dunedin but there is one professor I remember with great warmth. George Knight professor of Old Testament, was so enthusiastic about his subject. It was infectious. He saw Jesus in the O.T. Amongst the many books he wrote was, "A Christian theology of the O.T." He conveyed that the story of God's dealing with his people, Israel, in the past, was a fundamental foundation for Christian experience – memory of the past giving meaning to the present and future.

I discovered that from 1935 to 1940 Dr Knight directed the Scottish Mission in Budapest, given help to countless Jews in their desperate plight.

Some of you with very long memories may recall his leading worship here at St Johns in 1977!

The lectionary reading for today is Romans 11 where Paul raises the question – "What about the Jews?". That is, the Jews who have not yet accepted Jesus as Messiah.

"Has God rejected his people?" His unequivocal reply, "By no means! God has not rejected his people who he foreknew."

Prayer: God as we meditate on this theme may you work in our hearts and minds to reveal more of your truth.

Some Christians don't use the term, Old Testament, rather they prefer to speak of the, "First Testament". Because they want to convey that this isn't something, worn out, to be replaced. It's the first instalment, something that is part of the whole. That's what George Knight got across.

Jesus did not see his call as the call to be starting a new religion. He was thoroughly grounded in the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He attended the local synagogue, visited the temple in Jerusalem. As a boy was found by his parents discussing the scriptures with the scholars. People understood this. Saw him in the tradition of the prophets. As a teacher - yet one who, "taught with authority..."

Jesus had the big picture. He saw the hand of God, his Father way back, calling Abraham to bring renewal and hope to his people, and through them to the whole world.

Jesus understood that God had entrusted him with the mission of bringing this plan to fulfilment. After all the side-tracking, cull-de-sacks Israel had gone down, Jesus was going to take the plan forward.

His close disciples saw this only dimly at first. Later they understood. Then all that he had said previously made sense.

After the Risen Lord had walked with the two on the road to Emmaus they were to say -

“Didn’t our hearts burn within us when he talked to us on the road.”

For Jesus was explaining to them from the Jewish scriptures all the things concerning himself. –

Presumably, how he had been called to take up the role of the “suffering servant”, to be the representative of Israel, to embody Israel in his own person and to suffer on their behalf. To give his life “as a ransom for many”. That “by his stripes they might be healed”.

Jesus saw this as the mission God had called him to exercise. Later, following his ascension his disciples saw it with a clarity that sent them bursting to tell their kinsfolk – and not long after, to tell the whole world. For that was the commission the Risen Lord had given them. –

“Go and be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea, and to the whole of the world.”

Paul’s question – “Has God rejected his people?” arises because the Jewish leaders, and the people with them, acquiesced in sending Jesus to his death on the cross. They rejected God’s Son. Now Gentiles were hearing and receiving the good news of the gospel. Did that mean Israel was passed over for ever?

Paul and the other believers clearly saw themselves as still part of Israel. They saw that in Jesus the promises given to their fathers had been fulfilled. God had come back to his people.

Acts 2 “Day by day as they spent much time together in the temple...”

We can picture them in the morning excitedly looking forward to being at the temple, wondering who of their old buddies they would run into today, button-holing them, sharing their absolute certainty that the Jesus who was

crucified, was and is, the one all Israel had been waiting for, the Messiah. Often they were successful.

Acts 2 records– *“Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”*

The vast majority, though, stayed as they were. Believing that the only way to please God was by keeping the law and commandments, ticking all the boxes.

So you could say that Israel became divided – two Israels. The spiritual Israel which Jesus embodied, the Israel inheriting the promises. -

The one Peter described to the church he was writing to as –

“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” 1Pet2:9

And the stubborn Israel that continued on just the same as in the past, missing the new thing God was doing. The Israel that had come to think it had earned its place with God – chosen because of special qualities.

(But don’t you - don’t let me - get smug about this.)

This is where Paul gets into horticulture as he reaches for analogy. -

Which leads me to tell you about my venture into marmalade making.

We have an old grapefruit tree, seriously infested with borer, but which still produces grapefruit year after year. The interesting thing about this grapefruit tree though, is that one branch produces sweet oranges. I’ve discovered the fruit on this branch makes the best marmalade. I’d be daft though, to try and get rid of the rest of the tree, to say I don’t need it – and just keep the orange branch.

(Do I need to share that the moment I looked away, marmalade was all over the top of the stove?!)

There’s no record of Paul making marmalade but he knew about grafting and so his comment to Christians –

“If some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches.” Rms 11:17

Yes, Israel with its leaders and the bulk of its people, did not accept Jesus and see him as God’s fulfilment. They could not comprehend there was nothing a person could do to earn merit with God. They felt that they had earned their place in the kingdom. They could not understand it is all grace. All a gift from God. *“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”* (Rock of ages)

Trying to get the message across to them was like hitting your head against a wall.

It's puzzling. It's mystery, says Paul. But God has everything in hand. God has allowed his chosen people to step aside for a time that you Gentiles might receive the gift of life – that you might know the riches of his grace.

But don't you make the same mistake – get arrogant! Think you've earned your place - by the quality of your faith - or because you've chosen to be baptised - or joined a Fellowship.

"I've done this", "I've done that" kind of thinking.

eg Some years ago our Presbyterian Church sought to provide a service for people who had been baptised as infants, but now, in adult years, wanted to affirm their faith through immersion in water. They prepared a service.

The title of this service was chosen with real care.

It was not termed "Reaffirmation of Baptism by immersion" –

for that would imply that that action in baptism is directed by you and me – that we are the actors – that it's about what we have done

Rather it was termed Re-appropriation of Baptism –

for that indicates baptism is something one receives as gift – it is about what God has done. A subtle difference, but important when you think about it.

eg Again, the baptism of infants is not carried out in all branches of the Christian church, but where it is, the point is very clear – this human being has done nothing toward earning salvation – it is all gift, all by grace. -

Rms 11:20 ***"You stand only by faith."*** – By trusting yourself to Christ entirely and what he has done.

(Not faith in Christ but the faith of Christ.)

I wonder what Paul, if he was with us now, would have to say about the present day State of Israel in relation to God's plan.

The passage we have been studying makes it clear Paul believed there was a future for those who had once been chosen. There would be another chance.

Yet the scriptures are also clear that God's purpose of salvation was to be extended way beyond one people to the whole world.

Abraham's call recorded in Genesis 12 –

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Luke, writing at the beginning of the Book of Acts, records the Risen Jesus responding to the question

“Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? –

responding with these words –

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Luke is stressing the new kingdom, longed for, begun with the resurrection of Jesus, will not claim as its turf a single piece of territory but the entire globe.

Jesus, responding to Pilate, was to say -

“My kingdom is not of this world.” Jn 18:36

Galatians 4:25 speaks of “the Jerusalem above”

And this certainly is where the last two chapters of Revelation are pointing.

The scriptures tell the story of God’s restoring of humanity using the language and imagery that is available to humans. But the whole thing is way beyond description, beyond our imagining.

Remember how Paul speaks of “mystery.”

God has not finally rejected his once chosen People.

But now the covenant purposes of the Creator have moved way beyond the narrow confines of a single race. God has called into being a new trans-national, trans-cultural community. God has returned to dwell with his people, but not in a Temple made with hands.

The Gospel reading this morning told the story of the Canaanite woman who cried out for Jesus to heal her daughter.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David.”

Jesus reply – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”-

A reply that all Jews would thoroughly have agreed with.

Then her desperate cry – “Just let my daughter and I have some of the crumbs left over from Israel’s table”

“Let it be done for you.”

= Yes, the inclusion of non-Jews in God’s plan, but no thought of Israel losing all.

Can we see any light, any way ahead of the struggles currently taking place in what we called the “Holy Land”? What is God doing? How will it end?

When Jesus came to Jerusalem before his arrest, the people welcomed him with palm branches and loud hosannas.

They were full of anticipation – He was going to set his people free. Rome would be brought to its knees. James and John asked to sit on the right and left of the new king.

“No!! My kingdom is not of this world.” Note, Jesus didn’t say, “not in this world”. He was not indicating it would be airy-fairy, but that there would be a different way of bringing this kingdom into being.

The way would be through a cross, suffering, humility, counting others better than yourself, walking the extra mile, giving to those who beg, through love.

Through Death - Resurrection - A complete new body – A new creation.

This is the way God’s kingdom is introduced, continues, is experienced.

God’s kingdom, the fulfilment of the promises, will not come and be fulfilled through military might. The kingdom will come. In God’s perfect time. Halleluyah!

One day, one day the tree will become healthy again, and you and I (Christian) will be so grateful that we have been grafted onto the vine that God established way back in time and that he never gave up on

We end with a prayer taken from Psalm 80:14

“Turn again O God of hosts

look down from heaven and see

have regard for this vine

the stock that your right hand planted.”