

Transforming Presence Bible Study

Romans 12.1-15.13

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Introduction

The Transforming Presence agenda is impacting Diocesan planning and helping people to re-imagine what things might look like in 2025. This Bible Study is designed to be used as the starting point for theological reflection on Transforming Presence. The first Biblical reference in the Transforming Presence document is Romans 12, and participants at the Brentwood *Time to Talk* day started with a Bible reflection on Romans 12.1-6. These verses form the first part of the ‘application’ section of Paul’s letter (when Paul writes ‘therefore...’). This entire section runs from 12.1 to 15.13, which is the subject of this Bible Study.

It can be suggested that Paul’s Letter to the Romans taken as a whole puts forward a sustained argument, which is that because of Jesus Christ all people are now able to turn to God. A summary of this argument appears at the beginning and end of the Letter:

1.5b ...to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name...

16.26 ...but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith...

Another form of this summary appears also as the conclusion of the ‘application’ section of the letter:

15.8-9a For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

Paul describes how the whole of salvation history (the Biblical story), with Christ Jesus as the key, points to this truth—that all people, through an obedient response, are called to give glory to God for his life-giving promises. Thus in paraphrase the complete Letter to the Romans says:

Because of Jesus, everyone should and can connect with God; so we must respond in faith (although some ‘evil’ things can stop us); by the way, this is how Jesus does all this (he ‘justifies’ us, through the power of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit within the context of God’s ancient promises and our faithful response), and in fact nothing in the end can get between us and God; and by the way, this really is for everyone, not just Jews; therefore this is the way in which it will make a difference here and now to you (singular and plural) in Rome, and this is how you can be an transforming presence.

Paul therefore gets home his central message, that because of what Jesus has done everyone can now shape their lives towards God and glorify him.

The notes that follow are set out beside the text of Romans 12.1-15.13. The NRSV has been used here, but other translations are available. The biblical text has been divided into twenty short sections. These can be grouped so as to become a series of two, three or four Bible studies. Alternatively a single longer session could look at the entire section.

There are many good ways of leading a Bible Study, but one suggestion is to read aloud the passage, then allow a short pause for reflection and private re-reading, then to go round the group allowing each person (uninterrupted) to offer initial thoughts about things that have particularly struck them, and then to open out into a more general discussion. The ‘interpretation and comment’ notes can be used within that discussion as seems suitable.

Romans Chapters 12 to 15.13 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Interpretation and Comment

These opening two verses mark a new section in Paul's letter, which continues to 15.13. He begins to explain how the Christian community should live. The 'therefore' links this back to his earlier reflections on Christ, and how Jesus sets us right with God ('justifies' us). 'Spiritual worship' is literally translated 'reasonable religion', conveying the idea of something seemly and proper and instinctive to human nature. Paradoxically, this is also a sacrificial vision of life lived out in the world, and the key is to see that such a life is 'transformed' by renewal. Paul does not specifically mention the resurrection of Jesus Christ or the promise of the resurrection to come, nor does he refer to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. Instead he uses the language of discernment. Paul's appeal is made to the believers (plural), but the feel here at least seems partly to be one of an appeal to individuals rather than a collective body as such.

One might have expected Paul to launch first into encouraging words about how wonderful the Christian life is, but instead he warns against personal or individual superiority. The 'measure of faith', assigned by God, conveys the idea of Christians recognizing their place within God's 'story', the unfolding of salvation history, a history of grace bounded by judgement and a response of faith. This is a call for individual Christians to see themselves as dependent on God and as an element within a bigger picture.

The primary accountability is to God, but Paul goes on to describe the mutual accountability between Christians. He links individual gifts to the mutuality of a single 'body'. The unifying element is no longer ethnicity or geography, but participation in Christ. The list of gifts is different to that at I Cor. 12, so can be taken as being representative rather than definitive. The focus is on speaking and serving. Faith enables prophecy, which yields a vision of things from God's perspective, as per the previous section.

As when writing to the Corinthians, Paul then explains how this body is held together—by love. This theme of 'love' has a direct link to God's unfolding purposes (good over evil), but also has a strong practical element based on the honour and affection extended to fellow Christians. Paul's succession of orations has a slightly random feel about it. As if to reinforce this feeling, 'ardent' is a word meaning 'fermenting' or 'bubbling over'. Significantly, the call to make financial donations within the life of the Church is placed under this heading of 'love'. Paul ends by suddenly broadening his view to take in 'strangers', and this marks the moment when he starts considering how the Church should relate to the world.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!

It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

As Paul expands upon his injunction that hospitality must be shown to strangers he describes the stance that Christians should take. Despite Paul's overarching theme, that Christians should not be conformed to the world, the feeling is one of coming alongside non-Christians as equals, without haughtiness and without claiming superior wisdom. By appealing to the things that are noble in the sight of all, Paul acknowledges the innate goodness within human society and within creation.

Perhaps sensing that his argument is drifting in the direction of human self-sufficiency and natural goodness, Paul brings back a reminder of God's judgement. This section echoes Matthew 6, by linking evil to scarcity, and good to abundant provision. Christians are called to reflect this heavenly abundance here on earth, so overcoming evil with good. Human revenge arises out of the scarcity of the Fall, whereas divine judgement (wrath) is directed against everything that reinforces the effects of the Fall. As his argument develops, Paul is treading carefully a path between the goodness and fallen-ness of creation. This is why he does not overtly suggest bringing the world into the Church—there is no evangelistic programme here. Equally, Paul is not suggesting that the Church will always be a disengaged minority, somehow lost or hidden in the world.

Paul's argument swerves back in the direction of the basic orderliness (if not quite goodness) of the world. His context was not a democracy, but he sets out a high view of secular authority as part of the created order (c.f. Proverbs 8.15-16). He probably has in mind the common good, but it is noteworthy that he feels no need to add an eschatological limit to this advice. Paul's overall point is concerned with re-drawing the scope of the People of God in the light of Christ. This People is no longer defined in terms of a nation (Israel), so the role of a seemingly secular worldly authority paradoxically becomes more significant. The Christendom interpretation of these verses invites the church to project its control onto the state, but an alternative understanding suggests that the church must yield up any controlling tendencies, under God's wide-reaching providence.

Paul continues the theme of the godliness of the created order (including social structures) by appealing to conscience, which is seen to be presented here as a universal human characteristic, not a function of Christian faith particularly. Paul paints a picture of a vocational framework ('God's servants'), within which potentially everyone has their part to play. But the 'dues' owed and received act as a reminder that these vocations are played out within the fallen world—these are obligations not grace. 'Pay' is literally 'give back'. This implies some kind of original state of affairs, which gives rise to a strong sense of worldly justice. Paul's argument here seems to have drifted well away from any Christological moorings.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

Paul completes his reflections on not owing anything, but then strikingly makes an exception—love. This is the vocational yardstick which transforms the idea of 'getting along peaceably with others' into the idea of fulfilling God's purposes. The two things are not mutually incompatible; the one creates the space for the other. By its very nature love cannot be part of a worldly transactional scheme in which obligations are calculated and met. Instead, it is a creative thing that brings about new possibilities.

In mentioning love as the element which doesn't quite fit within the settled orderliness of creation, Paul has reminded himself of the importance of Jesus Christ. He therefore introduces an eschatological dimension, although this is not as strong as in his other letters. Any sense of expectation is actually quite weak. Instead, there is a feeling of anticipatory participation in Christ's resurrection—living as in the day even though it is not quite yet here. The sinful practices that Paul lists prevent Christians being true to this vocation, which is based on a baptismal 'putting on' of Christ. Paul here describes this vocation using the idea of 'living honourably', a theme which he had earlier connected to the love that binds the Church together. The overall feeling is one of 'early dawn', with the light appearing all around an essentially rooted human fellowship. Any sense of 'the race' or 'the journey' is not represented here.

Having painted a picture of God's goodness in creation and in the new dawn with Christ, Paul is now ready to address two particular problems (over food laws and holy days). He stresses that because God (N.B. not Christ) has welcomed us, we must welcome others. From the Greek, 'those' should be 'the one', making the welcome much more personal. Unity is found in God, not because of human moral superiority or carefully brokered deals, but because the Lord makes individuals stand (the Greek here is again in the singular). The picture is an intensely positive one as regards individuals, even while the possibility of quarrelling is acknowledged in passing as something to be shunned.

Paul's theme of 'honour' returns. Having used it to describe the love between Christians, and the love shown by individual Christians to others in general, he now adds the relationship between Christians and God. Paul has carefully constructed a picture of how things are intended by God to be—a picture in which mutual honour and love on a human level is bound tightly to a right relationship with God. One does not precede the other; they are mutually implied. Vocation on a human level cannot be separated from the vocation to give glory and honour to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.

Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

It can be suggested that the under-represented ingredient in Paul's argument to this point is the transforming power of Christ's resurrection. Perhaps sensing this, Paul introduces a specific reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not here couched in terms of a new creation (a theme seen at Romans 8), but in terms of a 'handing over' of the self to the Lord. There is no discernible future aspect. The important element is the universality of what Christ has done—all people are potentially included.

Paul uses Isaiah 45.23, one of the strongest Old Testament monotheistic verses, which coheres very well with his central theme—that every person (because of what Christ has done) can give glory to God and accept God's lordship and judgement. The unity which human beings thereby discover is accompanied by a primary accountability to God rather than to one another. This has the practical effect of playing up the significance of the individual vocation of a Christian before God.

With his mind on the individual Christian vocation, instead of describing any positive features Paul here stresses the importance of leaving others unhindered as they then work this calling out. Paul normally refers to the kingdom of God in terms of 'inheriting it'. Here, however, the future aspect is absent, and a link is made to life in the present, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The mutuality implicit in Paul's argument is that of 'raising the sights' of others in a spirit of peace. But this mutuality is important only in as much as it supports a personal conviction of faith. Paul could have reprised his 'body' metaphor here, but does not. The relationships between believers are to facilitate the 'clearing of a space' between God and the individual, rather than constituting in themselves the relationship with God.

In the Greek this section refers to an individual. The basis for morality is discovered in the realm of faith (over against sin). This links to Paul's earlier reminder that faith yields prophetic vision, and thus a participation in God's kingdom. Sin, in contrast, prevents such participation. This connects to the major section of the letter about the faithful response made by Abraham (chapter 4), and the careful balance between law and faith.

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written,
'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name';
and again he says,
'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';
and again,
'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him';
and again Isaiah says,
'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.'
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Unusually, Paul then appeals to the human example of Jesus Christ, who suffered insults, as a template for Christian behaviour. Hope here comes from steadfastness, rather than resurrection life in the new creation to come. Mutual forbearance, following the example of Jesus, results in social harmony, which then fosters the right conditions for a unified glorification of God. Once again, Paul has described a well balanced picture of harmonious mutual human relationships co-existing alongside the individual's settled and praise-filled relationship with God. But the collective aspect of this relationship is seen in the idea of the 'one voice'.

It could be argued that this is the 'high point' of the whole letter. Paul looks back to God's former promises and states that Jesus Christ (N.B. by virtue of his servant kingship, not here specifically his resurrection) opens this inheritance to all. This welcome from Christ means that we must welcome one another, so that God might better be glorified.

Paul ends with four Old Testament texts to back up his argument. Some have suggested that the final one points to the resurrection, although Paul's final benediction of hope is actually based on the powerful work of the Holy Spirit rather than explicitly on the resurrection of Jesus or the hope of resurrection for all.

Conclusion

The overall picture that emerges is that of a mature Paul setting out a well-balanced theological argument with many different elements woven together. While he does look back to the past and affirm God's ancient promises, and point to the resurrection of Christ with its associated future promises, more weight is attached to the way in which God's goodness in creation shines through. The collective and personal dimensions of vocation and ministry are balanced. So although disagreements are not described as impairing the unity, but as a potential stumbling block to an individual's faith, the ideas of the 'body' and of the 'one voice' are present. Paul has a special place for love, as the thing which transforms the essential goodness and orderliness of creation (nevertheless fallen) into a creation which truly glorifies God. The vocation of love between individuals is closely identified with the vocation of praise to God. This means that Paul's vision for the church's relationship with the world in general is based on a strong view of God's universal providence. The church's ministry is envisaged in terms of hospitality and welcome, within the context of a 'new dawn' because of Christ.