

‘A PORTRAIT OF GOSPEL CULTURE’ ROMANS 16:1-27

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday April 10, 2022 – All Services]

I remember reading a news story a couple of years ago about the AFL coach Dean Laidley¹. It made reference to the fact that the players he coached at North Melbourne used to refer to him as ‘the Bible’². That’s an interesting nickname, isn’t it? But it wasn’t because he knew everything there is to know about AFL. Apparently, he was called ‘the Bible’ because he was hard to read.

It’s a sad thing that this is how so many people in our society today see the Bible. Isn’t in a tragedy that some might choose not to even pick up a Bible because they don’t think they’re going to be able to connect with it? It is a tragedy. Because the Bible, of course, is in so many respects not hard to read at all.

And yet we need to acknowledge as well that this is not just a vicious rumour someone started. There are parts of the Bible that many people find hard to connect with, including Christians. And passages that contain long lists of names from a bygone era would be near to the top of some people’s lists. Passages like Romans 16 perhaps?

But I love this chapter. And I’ve loved rummaging around in it as I’ve prepared for this sermon. Because there are great riches here. And even a small amount of thoughtful reflection should lead to the conclusion that this is not a chapter that’s hard to connect with at all. Because what we have here, at the very end of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, is a portrait of the gospel culture he’s been talking so much about. It’s actually a very beautiful picture of what the gospel of Christ’s mercy produces. And thinking about this chapter is a great way to remind ourselves of some of Paul’s key themes in the letter.

And this morning/evening I want to point out to you four key things that form this portrait of gospel culture.

1. Gospel Fellowship.

Number 1, gospel fellowship. Because this chapter is not just a long list of names. It’s a story of rich and sweet Christian relationships.

- those Paul honours (vv.1- 16)

¹ Now known as ‘Dani Laidley’ - [Dani Laidley - Wikipedia](#).

² [Dean Laidley: Mick Malthouse talks about his former player and assistant coach \(theage.com.au\)](#)

The chapter opens with Paul commending Phoebe to the Romans. Many scholars think Phoebe was the one delivering this letter to the Roman Christians. But whether or not that's the case, Paul still asks the Romans to honour her by the way they welcome her into their midst. Paul is deeply grateful for the way she has blessed him and many others, and he wants to make sure she's given all the help³ she needs when she comes to Rome. And so he asks the Romans to receive her in a way that's 'worthy of his people'. That's a fascinating phrase isn't it? It speaks to the way in which the gospel produces certain qualities amongst Christ's people. One of those qualities is hospitality. So much so that Paul can say there's a way of welcoming a person that is 'worthy' of Christian fellowship and a way of welcoming people that would fall short of this. And that raises a good question doesn't it. When someone comes into our church who's new or visiting for the day, could we say they are always welcomed in a way that's 'worthy of his people'? Do we see someone we don't know but then look elsewhere for those we feel more comfortable with? Or do we make an effort to introduce ourselves, and build a connection, and show warmth and kindness? And this is not just a question that relates to first time visitors. Because people can be at a church for months and years yet still feel like an outsider. So let me ask you. Are there people in this congregation you don't know? If so, what are you planning to do about that? How can you reach out to them in a way that's worthy of the people of Christ?

But of course, after Paul asks the Romans to honour Phoebe, he goes on to name many other people in their fellowship he wishes to honour. And this seems to be the purpose of the greetings that follow in verses 3-16. And I use the word 'honour' deliberately here. Because Paul's not just saying hello. In many cases, he speaks of something which is distinctively true of an individual and which causes him to remember them with gratitude or affection. Paul is not listing all the members of the church here⁴. He's giving special mention to some in the church who he is particularly fond of for some reason. And I'm not going to go through the list of names in detail, but I do want to quickly point out a few themes that emerge.

And the first thing to notice is that Paul delights in particular people who've come to faith in Christ. Some of these people are special to him because he remembers their conversion- like Epenetus in verse 5⁵, or because he remembers that they were already believers when he became a Christian- like Andronicus and Junia in verse 7.

The second thing to notice is that Paul appreciates those who work hard for the gospel. This is true of Phoebe isn't it? But also Priscilla and Aquila- verse 3, Mary- verse 6,

³ The verb Paul uses here in the Greek means that he wants the Romans to 'stand by' Phoebe.

⁴ Though I acknowledge that he includes a greeting for members of house-churches meeting regularly with some of those he names- see verses 5, 14, and 15.

⁵ Paul literally describes him as the 'firstfruit of Asia'.

Urbanus- verse 9, and Tryphena and Tryphosa in verse 12- great names by the way! And notice Paul often refers to these people as being co-workers 'in Christ' or those who work hard 'in the Lord'. You sometimes hear people say these days that so and so does lots of work 'for the church'⁶. And that's no doubt true. But that phrase doesn't say enough does it. Because those who are generous towards the church are generous because they know the generosity of God in Christ. Those who serve Jesus' people do so because they count it a privilege to serve Christ. And Paul honours such people here.

The third thing I want to point out is the significance of verse 13 where Paul greets Rufus and his mother. Just by the way, it's possible that Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross out to Golgotha that first Easter⁷! But what I particularly want to point out is the way that Paul speaks of Rufus' mum. Because Paul's testimony is that she had been a mother to him as well- spiritually speaking. And this is a very beautiful reminder of what Jesus himself taught us to expect. In Mark 10 Jesus reassures his disciples that no one who gives up anything to follow Christ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in his kingdom: 'homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children' etc. In the church family we find siblings to encourage us, spiritual children to watch over and care for, spiritual mothers and fathers to nurture and guide us. What a gift. This was Paul's experience, as it is ours.

The fourth thing to notice here is the warm love Paul has for some especially. In several places here Paul refers to people as his 'dear friends'. Verse 5, verse 8, verse 9, and verse 12. Literally the word in the original is 'beloved'. And it's a great reminder to us of the gift of friendship. No doubt Paul would say that every person in the Roman church was his brother or sister. But not every person was his dear friend. And that's our experience too is it not? Belonging to the Christian family is itself a very sweet blessing. But to find within the Christian family some who become especially dear, some who are 'beloved', that too is a unique gift from the hand of a kind God.

And the fifth and final thing I want you to notice here is how richly diverse the fellowship in Rome was. Paul's affection is for fellow-Jews⁸ but also for Roman and Greek Gentiles. His affection was for people of wealth⁹ and people who were poor¹⁰. Notably, his affection was for both men and women, and he honoured both women and men as his colleagues and collaborators in gospel ministry. Paul's fellowship was with a community of people, not unlike our own church, marked by unity in the midst of great diversity. And this is all part of the wisdom of God.

⁶ I owe this observation to David Secombe- *Dust to Destiny: Reading Romans Today*, p.270.

⁷ See Mark 15:21

⁸ Literally 'kinsmen'- verses 7, 11, 21.

⁹ Eg. verse 2, verse 23.

¹⁰ Commentators think some of these names may have commonly been names given to slaves.

- those who greet the Romans (vv.21-23)

Now, the picture of gospel fellowship that emerges from this chapter doesn't just come from the first 16 verses, but also from verses 21-23. Because in those verses, Paul passes on to the Romans the greetings that come from people he was with at the time. And so we have another list of names. And these verses too fill out the picture for us. Paul is part of a team- Timothy his fellow pastor and teacher, Tertius his scribe, and Gaius his host. And this too is a reflection of the fellowship Paul enjoyed. Gospel fellowship is the affection Christian brothers and sisters feel for each other, and for some in particular. But gospel fellowship is also the joy of labouring in Christian ministry alongside others you trust. And my own testimony is that both these expressions of gospel fellowship are very precious. How wonderful it is to be part of a church family where people love and care for each other and where relationships grow between people for mutually blessing. And how wonderful it also is to labour alongside fellow-workers in the gospel, both inside the local church and beyond, fellow-workers who encourage us, and strengthen us, and pray for us, and set us a good example. How wonderfully kind God has been to us. This is gospel fellowship.

2. Gospel Concern.

And you'll be glad to know that that first point will be the longest. 😊

But the second thing that forms part of Paul's portrait of gospel culture in this chapter is gospel concern. And here I want to point out two ways that Paul expresses this in two different parts of the chapter.

- faithfulness to Jesus (vv.17-19)

Firstly- his concern for faithfulness to Jesus. Verses 17-19. Let me read you those verses again.

[Read 16:17-19]

Here Paul's thinking about the threat posed by false teachers- those who smoothly deceive and so divide the church. And Paul's concern is with the possibility of naivete amongst his Christian sisters and brothers. And that's a helpful word here isn't it. Because it reminds us that people don't get led away from the truth of the gospel on purpose. People don't choose to be deceived. People don't tend to suddenly break with others in the church for rebellious reasons. Mostly, when people drift into theological error or division it's a result of naivete. And so, let me remind you. If on some issue you

find yourself in disagreement with a number of other people at church, it would be easy to become defensive or dismissive. But, in that situation, Paul wants us to ask ourselves whether it's possible we've been naively distracted from the truth. And he wants us to protect ourselves from that danger. So we could ask ourselves: Am I guarding against naivete by being a serious student of the Scriptures? Am I protecting myself, and others, by being a deep thinker, not a shallow thinker, by forming my own careful thoughts rather than just running with what someone else thinks or says? Can I give an account of why I believe the teaching I've learnt? If I can say yes to these questions, then I will be in a strong place to watch out for those who don't teach the truth- the start of verse 17, and to keep away from them- the end of verse 17.

And the reason this matters is because naivete has the potential to undermine my faithfulness to Jesus. Paul's encouragement is that we might keep serving Christ. That we might go on being obedient. That we might be wisely loyal to the good, but innocent when it comes to every kind of evil. Paul wants us to be like his brother Apelles who we hear about in verse 10- someone whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

- obedience to Jesus (vv.25-27)

But the second way Paul expresses his gospel concern in this chapter is in the final paragraph- verses 25-27. And here we see the same concern with obedience that we just noticed in verse 19. And this is a concern that has occupied Paul's mind from the very start of the letter. Right back in 1:5 Paul says of his own ministry that his God-given task is to call the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith- for his name's sake. And this final paragraph of the letter really does echo the opening paragraph in significant ways.

In actual fact the last three verses of the book are a doxology- an expression of praise to God for his power and wisdom. But this doxology is wrapped around a reminder of what God uses his power and wisdom to do- to establish his people in Christ through the gospel- the gospel that was once hidden, but has now been revealed so that- verse 26- 'all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith'.

Paul's gospel concern, you see, is simply a reflection of who the gospel teaches us Jesus is. He is the one who is worthy of our faithful service, the one who was himself perfectly faithful to God and who served us in love. And he is the one who deserves our obedience since he is the risen Lord. And all who know this Jesus will carry in their hearts this gospel concern. Every church that is founded on the gospel will have this culture- an abiding concern that every member might be kept and protected in the truth, and that every member might obey every command Jesus gives.

3. Gospel Confidence.

And then the third thing that forms part of Paul's portrait of gospel culture in this chapter is gospel confidence. He trusts in the power of God to conquer his enemies and to protect his people. And he invites us to do the same. He invites us to look to the future with hope- not in our strength, but in his. The gospel, you see, teaches us humility- an honest assessment of our own unreliability. But the gospel also teaches us about the trustworthy love and power of our heavenly father. And that's how the gospel breeds confidence. And the confidence of the apostle Paul surfaces particularly in two key verses here.

- the end of God's enemies (v.20)

Firstly, verse 20.

[Read 16:20a]

As you might know, this verse speaks to the fulfilment of a very ancient promise. In fact, the most ancient promise there is. When God pronounced a curse upon Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the garden of Eden back in Genesis 3, this is what God promised in his curse on the serpent: 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'¹¹. Ever since that day, Satan has been nipping at the heels of God's people. And ever since that day God's people have been waiting for the crushing of Satan's head. And Paul says here that there's a day to come, when Jesus returns, when the deceptive and destructive influence of Satan in the world will end, once and for all. And, on that day, all of God's people will share in the victory. Of course, it's a victory only possible because of Jesus. Jesus destroyed the work of the devil¹² when he crushed sin and trampled on the head of death. But, nevertheless, the Devil's influence remains. For now. But one day soon, God's people, in and through Christ, will finally vanquish him. And Paul is confident in this victory because he's confident in God. The God of peace¹³. He will do it.

- the establishment of God's people (v.25)

And the other thing he will do is establish his people. God will not only defeat his people's enemy. He will also provide for and protect his people. He will vindicate them as those who belong to Christ. This is what Paul praises God for in verse 25.

¹¹ Genesis 3:15

¹² See 1 John 3:8 etc

¹³ See also 15:33. And for the theme of peace in Romans more generally, see 1:7, 2:10, 3:17, 5:1, 8:6, 12:18, 14:19, 15:13. I think this is a major theme in the letter.

[Read 16:25a]

People today talk about getting 'established'- perhaps in the property market, or in a career, or in a social network, or perhaps with a retirement plan. But God doesn't establish his people according to the values of the world. He establishes his people in accordance with the gospel. He establishes them in faith, and in the obedience that flows from faith. He brings them to himself. He saves them. Then he renews their minds and transforms them into the image of Jesus. He keeps them to the very end. And when I say 'them', I mean us. God does all this for us. He teaches us the gospel. And he grows us in living sacrifice. He grows gospel culture in our church. And as he does, we can be confident that he will keep doing it.

Sometimes we worry about what the future holds don't we. What's happening with the world? Who on earth can save Ukraine? How will all that is wrong with the world be made right? And what about our church? What will its future be? What will things be like under a new Senior Pastor? And how can we make sure we keep growing? And what about ourselves? Who will conquer the evil that's within me? Who will help me face life's challenges without falling down? Who will look after me when I can't look after myself? God has an answer to every one of those questions. In fact, Paul would say that God is the answer to every one of those questions.

He is the eternal God- verse 26. He has been at work in the world for long ages past- verse 25. And he will receive glory for an eternal future- verse 27¹⁴. This eternal God will one day right every wrong. And this eternal God will carry his people into eternity with him. This is gospel confidence.

4. Gospel Purpose.

Which leads us, finally, to gospel purpose. Expressed so perfectly in the final verse of the letter.

[Read 16:27]

- glory to God (v.27)

Right back at the start of *Romans* Paul said that though God is forever praised and deserves all glory, the people he's made have exchanged the glory of the immortal God and have worshipped and served created things rather than the creator¹⁵. But, as he

¹⁴ The same Greek word root is used in all three of these verses.

¹⁵ Romans 1:21-25

went on to say, thanks to the mercy of Jesus, Christ's people are liberated from false worship. And now they're able to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God- their true and proper worship. And when they live in true worship, God receives the glory he has always deserved. This is the point of the letter. Because it's the point of our lives. The point of the world. The glory of God. Forever.

- through Jesus Christ (v.27)

Through Jesus Christ. We give God his glory, of course. But it doesn't come through us. It comes through Jesus. He came to earth for the glory of God. He brought glory to God in his loving death for sinners. And he announced God's glory to the universe by his majestic resurrection.

And it is only because of Jesus Christ that we can worship God at all. We are living sacrifices only through Jesus. Our church has a gospel culture only through Jesus. It's because of Christ that we enjoy the taste of sweet gospel fellowship. It's because of him that we have a concern for the things that God cares about- faithfulness and obedience to Christ. And it's because of him that we have a confidence in the final victory over Satan, and a confidence in his power to care for us and to keep us. All to the glory of his Father and ours.

[Read 16:27]