

Today's scripture comes from Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome. This is the very beginning of the letter, and it comes at a time when Rome was in great power. This letter was written at a time when the first Christian creed was *Kurios Jesus*, "Jesus is Lord," and the Roman creed was *Kurios Kaisar*, "Caesar is Lord." Most of us cannot imagine what it was like to be a Christ follower in first century Rome. The emperor was more than a king; he was a kind of god, requiring worship, sacrifice, and absolute loyalty. The coronation yesterday in England for King Charles III was very much a religious service representing multiple faiths, yet the monarchy is not a god. God is recognized as God. Maybe a closer analogy for us who have read about the Holocaust or seen Nazi movies would be "Heil Hitler." There were some who refused to say that, instead saying "Heil Jesus," and they were punished, some with their lives. A few things to keep in mind about the Book of Romans: the Apostle Paul is writing with a good sense of urgency to clarify some things about the gospel. Romans is the only letter of Paul's that he is sending to a church that he hadn't founded nor that he visited, as he writes this letter from Corinth. And Paul makes some assumptions that his audience consists of believers who already know a good bit about Jesus. One of Paul's purposes in writing them is to introduce himself, his authority as an apostle. Romans itself indicates that the Christian community there was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Most of Romans is about Paul's central convictions about the gospel. In the first half of this letter, Paul focuses on God's love for believers. Specifically though in today's passage, Paul gives what most scholars call the theme or thesis of the entire letter in verses 16-17. A quick sidenote: Romans has provided the

impetus for the major theological revolutions of the Christian era, a claim that cannot be made for any other single biblical book. This epistle or letter is theological dynamite that helped to start the Reformation, was the source of John Wesley's conversion at Aldersgate in 1738 just to name two examples. Many of us dismiss Paul's letter to the Romans as Paul taking the simple teachings of Jesus and complicating them with doctrinal intellectual speech. This isn't the case. "Paul's genuine epistles are by far the earliest of the NT writings and there's not the slightest hint in scripture that there is any conflict between the Gospels and Paul's letters. Instead, Paul, in his letters, is commenting upon, interpreting, expanding, extending, and drawing out the implications of Jesus' parables, teachings, and deeds" (Fleming Rutledge, *Ashamed of the Gospel*). So put your crash helmets on because this is a lot packed into 17 verses. But before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

In 1994, I studied abroad in Beijing, China. For an American, it was eye opening to live in a communist country. At the time, I was questioning my faith, and a fellow student invited me to church. We finally arrived by bus at a huge hotel. We took the elevator down to the basement. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a huge auditorium filled with people from all over the world. We worshiped in many different languages. There were interpreters helping people translate scripture. I found out later that people had traveled for days to worship in this underground church. In China, Christianity without government control cannot be practiced openly. For me, this was a spiritual awakening. I had been taking my freedom to

worship and my faith for granted. Five years had passed since the Tiananmen Square student-led revolt and massacre. A good many students were killed for their cries for democracy. And the image of the one man with his hand held out like a stop sign standing in front of the tanks is etched in my mind...that was the Christian Church in Rome (Rutledge).

Paul doesn't mince words. He gets right to the point. Although he introduces himself to the church in Rome, he doesn't linger there. Because his message is not about him; it's about Jesus. What Paul does in his introduction is identify that he is a servant of Jesus Christ, not of Caesar. This good news of God's is counter-cultural. It is disruptive to the existing Roman culture- to the center- to the power. Paul continues with the best news ever- that the God who has been proclaimed by the small population of Israel actually is keeping a faithful promise to bring abundant life to everyone and that was the message of Jesus Christ.

The word "gospel," which means good news, is a living entity- a power- "God's power." This is how Paul defines the gospel: 'it is God's power.' The gospel is alive and active and its purpose is salvation. The whole focus and purpose of the gospel is saving, healing, and making right. The gospel is not a power that seeks power itself. Rather, God's power is entirely directed toward salvation: providing for humanity's needs and comforting hurts" (L. Ann Jervis, wp.org). "The gospel Paul proclaims is part of a larger story involving an act of God that God had previously promised in Scripture. Before the gospel is about our faith toward God, it is about God keeping

faith with us. The content of the message is Jesus Christ” (J.R. Daniel Kirk, workingpreacher.org). Paul writes that it’s God’s own power making things right for all who have faith in God, including the Jews and the Gentiles. In other words, God has accomplished through Jesus what Israel could not do. Through Jesus Christ God is making right the relationship between humans and God.

Look at the cross. The faith through which Jesus is made alive is his own faithfulness to God in going to the cross. The cross/crucifixion was intended to be the pinnacle of shame. This form of capital punishment was specifically designed to be degrading and dehumanizing to the extreme degree. They stripped you of all your clothes, leaving you exposed and then beat you to a pulp in public; nailed you to a cross and left you hanging there by the roadside for all to watch you die. Thus showing that the Roman empire treats you as a non-person and that they have the power to do this to you. In this context, Paul says that thing that is supposed to bring the most shame, I am not ashamed. In fact it is through this shameful thing that God does the work that God is doing in the world (workingpreacher.org podcast). Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. Therefore, when Paul preaches in Corinth and in other places, he often connects the words “shame” and “foolishness” with the word “gospel.” After all, “God chose what is foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considered weak to shame the strong. And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing” (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

Are we ashamed of the gospel- of God's power through Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Many of us experience God in Christ and have come to faith in various ways while some of us may not be believers. Perhaps the word "trust" comes closer to the mark of capturing the active nature of faith than the word "faith" does for many of us (Kirk). Because the gospel effectively creates trust. Those of us who call ourselves Christians respond to God's faithfulness by living by faith (which Paul quotes from the prophet Habakkuk (2:4)). Paul was not embarrassed nor ashamed to declare his absolute commitment to the gospel- so much so that he was willing to come as a minority and proclaim a new king and Lord who wasn't Caesar- right in the heart of the powerful Roman empire. He was called to preach to both the Jews and to the Gentiles. Paul says that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" (v. 4). When Paul says that the righteousness of God is put on display "through faith," he is referring to the Christ event. "We have seen what this power looks like- it is resurrection power, by the Spirit. As we will celebrate in a few weeks, Paul expects that God's people live lives of resurrection power, now, by the Holy Spirit" (Kirk).

Where have you experienced God's power in your life? Or is it too embarrassing to admit our helplessness or that we need saving? In recovery, for example, one must have a spiritual power in order to overcome addiction because you cannot do it by yourself. God is the one with the power to transform and to save, not us. We cannot deliver ourselves! Human nature. It needs a savior. We have one. Jesus Christ. The

Holy Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ is powerful to change us into something we ourselves cannot become (Rutledge). “The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is rooted in God’s astonishing and undeviating faithfulness to God’s creation, including fickle humanity. God’s faithfulness is met by our faith in God’s revelation. Yet, even our faith is rooted in God’s faithfulness. Our faith is not ‘ours.’ Our faith is sourced in God’s faithfulness to us” (Jervis). That’s right. Faith-trust- is something created in us by God. It is a gift. “This understanding of the source of our faith may relieve many anxieties about whether we have ‘enough’ faith, or if our faith is ‘adequate’ or ‘correct.’ It is not ‘our’ faith. In the gospel, God is unveiling the magnificence of God’s faithfulness towards us in such a powerful way- that if we pay close attention- our souls may be awakened and we may find ourselves invited into the life of God. Our faith makes us righteous, not because we have been good enough to believe in the gospel, but because the righteousness of God surrounds us as we exercise the faith- the trust- that God gives us” (Jervis).

Have you ever had a moment or observed or read about a time when something happened that wasn’t human nature but divine nature? For example, when you witness strength and courage that doesn’t seem humanly possible? These are the moments when you know it’s God’s power in someone- Christ in us. Not I, but Christ in me. “The next time you let someone else go first, or back off from a fight, or forgive someone, or stand up to someone weaker than you are, that’s not you doing it. That’s Christ in you. May we all remember this power beyond all earthly power

whenever we are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel” (Rutledge). For by God’s power we all have been changed, the angels in heaven done signed our names. May we all trust in God’s saving power at work in this world.

Amen.