

Romans 1:18-32 at ASA on 16/06/2024

“Which do you want first? The good news or the bad news?”

When someone asks that, which do you choose, I wonder.

Having heard the reading today from Romans, we might assume that Paul is giving us the bad news first.

Except, actually, Paul doesn't give us the bad news first because he already gave us the good news last week:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17)

And so our passage comes in the context of this good news of salvation.

If you were not here last week, it might be helpful to listen to that on the livestream or look out for when the notes show up on the website.

And so, we are not to come to these grim verses terrified. They are not there to beat us up with, “Listen to how sinful you are!” Rather, they are to show us—look at what you have been saved from. See how wonderful God's salvation is.

A good illustration of this is the difference between going to the doctor and seeing through an x-ray a tumor inside you, which is really scary. Or going to the doctor and seeing in a jar of formaldehyde the tumor that was removed from you two weeks ago.

And seeing it in the jar, you are grateful. This isn't something that is inside you; it's something that was inside you.

And as you look at it in the jar, you almost want to kiss your doctor out of gratitude, and you are motivated to give up smoking or whatever it is that caused the tumor in the first place.

That's the experience we are to have as we read this grim diagnosis. This is what we have been saved from.

No doubt it is still a horrid thing, even as we look at it safely in the formaldehyde, but we are not terrified.

v. 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people.

The word "wrath" is simply the normal word for "anger."

And it might be that for some of you, the idea that God is angry is totally foreign.

The dominant view in our culture is that God, if he exists, is nice and he is our friend. God is love; God is good, and we've taken those attributes and made them into a version of God that sort of

has a permanent faint smile. It doesn't matter what we do, good or bad, he just smiles indifferently. He really doesn't mind.

And yet, here Paul says that God is not our friend in our sinfulness; he is our enemy.

And note that it is in the present tense. Paul will talk about his future anger, but here it is his presently ongoing anger.

God's anger is, of course, not like our anger. I get angry when I run very fast, get to the train platform sweating profusely, but the train leaves me standing there because I was one second late. And I stand there boiling in anger as if I've suffered some terrible wrong.

God doesn't get angry because of traffic or because he hasn't had his coffee in the morning. God gets angry about things he ought to get angry about.

And I think we understand it. When we watch on the news that a young girl has been abused, we get angry, don't we? When someone harasses your wife or someone else you love on the train, you ought to get angry.

And Paul doesn't just tell us that God is angry; he tells us why he is angry. God is rightly angry.

So, two points: Why God is angry and what that anger looks like in practice.

1. Why God is Angry

v. 18 again, *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

God is angry at the propensity humans have to suppress the truth about him.

And I think this is a surprise because we expect it to say, "What is God so angry about? God is so angry about the mass rape or killing of children in the Middle East," or whatever horrible thing you might think of.

And of course, God is angry at those things, no doubt.

But fundamentally, the root crime of humanity is that we suppress the truth about God.

And the premise is that in order to suppress the truth, you need to have had the truth. It was available to you, but you suppressed it.

v.19 *Since what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

Paul says it's instinctively, perfectly, inexcusably obvious to everyone in the world that God is our powerful, eternal creator. Everyone.

God has made it clear. But we hide; we turn away.

Here in the West, science has been the most popular hiding place.

And science has made real progress in helping us understand the complexity of the world. Science has given some plausible insights into some of the changes over time that might have happened to it.

But all these scientific insights in no way can explain away the fact that the world has a creator.

The assertion that science and Christianity are at odds with each other is only testament to the fact that we suppress the truth—it is a myth. Some of the greatest scientists our world has had have been committed Christians and it is their faith in a creator that inspired their scientific exploration.

So, the crime of humanity is that though it is obvious to any of us that there is God, we suppress that truth.

v.21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.

But what did we do?

v.23 They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

v.25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.

v.28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God.

Which is a very striking way of putting it: we couldn't just be bothered; we didn't think he was worth the time.

That's our crime!

And the point is not that each of us individually can look into our own autobiographies and work out a time we knew God and then the exact point at which we began to suppress the truth. This is the story of humanity in general.

Paul here is echoing the creation story and the fall of man in Genesis 1-3. It is the point at which we exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

This is the story of humanity—this is why God is angry—this is why we needed salvation—Genesis 3: though we knew God, we suppressed the truth about God.

2. What God's Anger Looks Like in Practice

And again, it is very clear in the passage:

v.24 *Therefore God gave them over...*

v.26 *Because of this, God gave them over...*

v.28 *...so God gave them over...*

God's response to our rejection of him, the manifestation of his anger now, is to give us over to what we want to do. To leave us to our own devices.

You could say God takes the brakes off; he stops interfering. "You want to live without me? Alright, go ahead! You are free." Of course, resulting in social and moral disintegration.

And it is within that context that we are told that God gives people over to homosexual acts.

I want to use these last few minutes we have on that topic, partly because this is a clear passage about it but also because there is much confusion about it at the moment.

v.26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And I want to say four things that I hope might be helpful:

1. This passage does not say that God is particularly angry with gay people or that homosexuality is a particularly worse sin.

God is angry, according to this passage, because of the way we suppress the truth about Him. And that's a universal problem—straight or gay or trans, black or white, male or female, old or young. Everyone suppresses the truth about God.

And so what Paul says here about homosexuality isn't part of the explanation of what makes God angry; it is the outworking of that anger. I'll explain that in a moment.

2. What Paul is describing here, and in other places, is not merely having an attraction or being tempted in a particular way.

Just like most people would be tempted in heterosexual ways, and we would say temptation in and of itself is not the problem; the problem is acting on those temptations. I take it the same applies to those tempted by homosexual sins.

3. We know from the wider context of Paul's writing that same-sex-attracted people, or those who had previously been involved in homosexual practice, are among the members of the church—among those now justified by the Lord Jesus.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6, which we have been reading in our LifeGroups: *“And that is what some of you were!”* referring to a list that includes homosexuals.

He continues, *“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

So there were people with a homosexual story in the Corinthian church.

And it's the same thing here in Romans. Like we said in the beginning, this may be a strongly-worded diagnosis of homosexual sin, but it's like a tumor in formaldehyde. This is what you were saved from. They are people in this Roman church for whom this is their story.

So if you are here and that is your story, I may not be the chaplain here, but I can confidently speak for the chaplain and the leaders of this church that you are very welcome here at All Saints. The sins Jesus saved us from do not define us here; only the blood of Jesus that has washed all of us clean defines us here.

And I pray that All Saints will not be the sort of patronizing church that says to people things we know are not true but think will make you feel nice. We don't want to be that church.

We want to be a church where people of all orientations, all ages, all races, and all backgrounds can feel welcomed, loved, and

supported to deny ourselves, carry our cross and follow the Lord Jesus.

And following Jesus always comes at a cost to everyone, sometimes deep personal cost.

4. The Bible is undeniably clear that homosexual acts are contrary to God's plan for our sexuality.

It's important to say this because in the last few decades, particularly here in the West, there has been a massive shift and confusion in church and theological thinking about this topic.

Many denominations here in the West, including the Church of England, are on a trajectory to affirm and bless homosexual marriage as consistent with God's plan and biblical teaching.

I don't want to go into the entire debate, which is mostly what I heard someone call "exegetical gymnastics," but because we are in Romans 1, I wanted to show you the classic way that some people use this passage to claim that it really doesn't say what it clearly says:

The argument goes something like this: What Paul is condemning here is extreme promiscuity and some sort of experimentation. So you are normally straight, perhaps married, but then you want to experiment outside what you normally are. They say that's wrong and that's what Paul is talking about. But if you find yourself to be naturally gay, then it is totally right for you to enjoy gay marriage.

They use the phrase "natural relations" in verses 26 and 27 and interpret it as what is natural to you.

But that phrase "natural relations" can't mean that kind of subjective, individualistic, what each of us here feels. "Natural" is in this context relative to creation; relative to what God has made. We exchanged what God has made for that which is contrary to how it was made or designed.

It's an external standard; the original design.

And as I've already pointed out, Genesis 1-3 is really in the background here. This is about what the Creator made and how we have rebelled against it.

This is why I think Paul singles out homosexuality as an example of God handing us over. It is a practice that most clearly signals our disinterest in what the Creator made. God made male and female and joined them into a sacred one-flesh union (marriage), and we say that's nonsense. We can be and do what we like, what feels good to us.

And Paul says, isn't that just the most ideal illustration of our indifference to our Creator? Our suppression of God's obvious truth?

But it's by no means the only one. In verse 24, it's sexual immorality in general, and in verse 29, Paul widens out to a whole catalogue of other sins: greed, murder, pride, etc.

And when we read this horrid list of sins, what we instinctively think is that these are the things that make God angry.

But Paul says, actually, these are the consequences of making God angry. They are the consequences of God saying: I'll get out of your way. I'll take the brakes off.

Which of course means there's a deep irony when society says, "See, we can do what we want. We can have sex with whoever we want. We can curse God and do all these sorts of things. And God is not doing anything about it. God doesn't really care."

Because the fact that you can do all that evil, and God does nothing, is a manifestation of just how angry He is.

It's like a parent telling their child, "You've been so rebellious, I'm just going to let you do whatever you like." It's a sign of just how angry that parent is.

Or a government telling its population, "You've defied the law so much that we won't even bother giving you a police force then."

And of course, if you are an idiot, you might think, "Yay, no police force. We can do whatever we want. We are so free." The irony of course is that this is a terrible judgment, to live in an anarchist state without law and order.

God is so angry with humanity that He takes the brakes off. He gives us over.

Which is why we must feel really sad about denominations doing things like blessing gay marriage. Because it really is the sign that God has given them over. You can't have a clearer sign that God's judgment is over a church than when you see them falling over themselves to bless something that God clearly rejects.

So just one final thought of application as I finish: If handing over is a sign of God's anger, then restraint is a manifestation of His love.

Every time God's word rebukes us, every time God puts a brake on us, every time you have to deny a desire in you so that you honor God—maybe for some here, every time you say no to your homosexual desires or heterosexual desires expressed outside of marriage for the sake of following Jesus—that is a manifestation of His love to you.

Just like every time a parent says to their child, "No more ice cream," and they think they are being mean. It's their love for them because they don't want them to be horribly sick.

If handing over is a sign of God's anger, restraint is a sign of God's love.

And God does not hand over people forever if they turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. Just to remind you, this passage is not what God feels about you now if you are a Christian. This is a tumor in formaldehyde. This is what you are to look at and kiss

your doctor—grateful for how good the gospel is. Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

****Post Script****

Two further thoughts that time didn't allow me to make in the sermon.

1. I understand that this topic is very controversial at the moment and there would be people who are not sure of the position taken in this sermon or are struggling with it. If that's you, I want to assure you that you are still very welcome at All Saints. Our ministry to you is not conditional on agreeing with every position that the church teaches. We mean it when we say everyone is welcome!

You are also welcome to ask questions. We have various people in the church that you can speak to, particularly Anneke Mol and Jon Harris, who lead our pastoral care. But you are of course also welcome to keep your questions until our Chaplain is back from his sabbatical. We are committed to support you in every way we can as you wrestle with this.

2. I think it is also clear from this Romans passage that this is not a matter over which we can agree to disagree. Christians disagree on many things, for example, on the topic of baptism. Here at All Saints, we both practice child baptism and adult/believers baptism. And that's fine to disagree on things like

that. But we cannot take that approach with the issue of same-sex marriage.

Verse 32 states: *"Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."*

Paul here puts those who commit the sin and those who approve of them in the same boat. This is why we cannot affirm it, even if we don't do it ourselves.

In the wider biblical context, it is also very clear that this is a sin among other sins that, if unrepented of, jeopardizes people's eternal destinies (1 Cor. 6:9-10). We therefore cannot affirm or approve a practice that the Bible clearly states will exclude people from the kingdom of God.
