

TRINITY LECTURE 2 - Bible Study

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[0 : 0 0] This week the three Bible studies are related really only on the theme of mission. They're not consecutive. Last night Psalm 47 and tomorrow night something from one of the Gospels.

But today from this reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, as we continue to think about the theme of mission, and in particular some aspects in this passage of mission strategy.

So let's pray. God our Father speak to us from your word, write it in our hearts, that we may love it, believe it, obey it, all for the honour and glory of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before I came here to Doncaster 12 years ago, I was working in the UK, doing some further study and working in a church. And each month I would take the early morning Book of Common Prayer service in a church building that was about 900 years old.

So not all that old really in English standards. And one day I was actually looking after the place because all the staff had gone off to an ordination service at Gloucester Cathedral. And one of our female staff members was being ordained that day as a priest in the Anglican Church.

[1 : 2 0] And I remember that in the intercessions that morning I prayed for Audrey being ordained a priest, to which one old lady, highly eccentric, shouted out in the middle of the intercessions, this is polite English people you remember, priestess, to which another person decided he would interject and call out priesthood of all believers.

Well, this is only the intercessions of a church. I mean, I didn't think I was being all that political in just praying for Audrey who was being ordained. But nonetheless, it raised the thorny issue of is a Christian minister a priest?

Priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifices. And of course, in medieval Catholicism, I suppose, the priests would regard themselves as in part the Roman mass, offering again a sacrifice of Christ in some form or other.

And though the Reformation rejected the idea of the mass and the reenactment or the re-offering of Christ as a sacrifice, at least in Anglican tradition, they kept the term priest.

Not so Presbyterian, of course. They used the term presbyter. And there are certainly many evangelicals in the Anglican Church today who often wish that we had the term presbyter, not priest.

[2 : 3 8] But here in the New Testament, we have the, I think, only reference to a person who is a minister in the New Testament terms who is called a priest.

Paul writes about himself in this passage in priestly ministry. But it's far from offering a sacrifice or the mass or the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Rather, the priestly ministry that Paul refers to is evangelism, in effect, mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This passage is instructive to us at a number of levels about mission and evangelism and about mission strategy and priorities.

And Paul begins from verse 14 reflecting a little bit on his call to be an apostle. That's why he's written this letter boldly, he says, so I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

Nevertheless, on some points I've written to you rather boldly. In particular, I suspect he's referring to the issues of Jew-Gentile relationships within the church, the need to love one another, in particular weaker brethren or people from different backgrounds.

[3 : 56] And he's written rather boldly, he says, this letter to the Romans. By way of reminder, it's not new, they know this, they're a church, they're Christians already who've heard this. Because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God.

So when occasionally some of my evangelical friends say we should be not calling ourselves Anglican priests, I often refer them to this passage here.

The proper priestly ministry is in fact evangelistic ministry. And sometimes when the more liberal or high church Anglicans sort of revel in the term priest, I urge them to remember what is fundamental to it, that is evangelism and mission.

And that's what Paul is talking about. And he says in the rest of that verse, What Paul is using, in a sense figuratively, is that as an Old Testament priest would offer a sacrifice, ideally acceptable to God, Paul as an evangelist in the work of mission of the gospel, is in a sense by leading Gentiles to be converted to Christ, offering them to God as an acceptable offering.

That's his sense of priestly ministry, which is evangelistic. And the sacrifice is of the, not a blood sacrifice, but in a sense he's offering to God the Gentiles, and the means of such an offering is the gospel.

[5 : 35] Now, we need to remember how striking these words are. In the Old Testament, there was such a strong distinction between Jew and Gentile.

So in the temple of Jesus' day and Paul's day, Gentiles were barred from coming very close at all to the temple. Indeed, there was a sign that said that Gentiles crossing beyond this point or up these stairs did so under promise of death.

So the distinction between Jew and Gentile was highly significant in the Jewish background of the Old Testament. And for Jews, Gentiles were unclean.

Here Paul is saying that he's offering to God Gentiles converted through the gospel. The implication is that the gospel has made clean Gentiles, has purified them in a bigger way than an Old Testament sacrifice had to be clean, in a bigger way than ritual offerings or washings in the Old Testament made clean.

Here Paul is offering what would normally be regarded as unclean Gentiles, offering them to God, cleansed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 48] No longer simply Jews coming close to God, but Gentiles on an equal footing as well. So what we recognize here, I guess, which we take for granted, given that I assume most of us come from Gentile backgrounds, is that the gospel is equally for all, Jew or Gentile.

Without distinction is one of the emphases in the early chapters of this letter of Paul to the Romans. The language that he uses of offering Gentiles picks up language from the end of the prophet Isaiah, which we haven't quite got time to go back to and look into.

Paul sees himself, therefore, as not simply just a priest offering Gentiles to God through the means of the gospel, but actually thereby, alluding back to Isaiah, sees himself as part of the trajectory of the gospel from beginning to end of the Bible as well.

More than that, he's fulfilling, I think, what Israel ought to have been. Israel's role was to be a royal priesthood, language from back in Exodus at Mount Sinai.

It failed to do that. We never see that really fulfilled, other than occasional glimpses, as I mentioned last night, for example, with someone like the Queen of Sheba coming to Solomon's temple.

[8 : 06] The Old Testament looked forward to a perfect Israel or a perfect servant of Israel or remnant, ideally, in the end, Christ, whose death brings people to God.

But Paul sees himself as, that line doesn't necessarily stop at Christ, but sees himself as part of the fulfillment by being a priestly minister of the gospel for the sake of the Gentiles or the nations of the world to bring them to God.

Of course, we also find in the New Testament that the church is a royal priesthood. This is perhaps the only reference to an individual after Pentecost who is regarded as a Christian priest, but the whole church, of course, like ancient Israel, was to be a royal priesthood.

So 1 Peter 2 uses the language of Exodus 19, applying it to the church. So the church as a whole has a priestly ministry, not of sacrifices and rituals and things, but rather a priestly ministry of evangelism to bring the world to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A couple of things that Paul mentions about this ministry that are important. Firstly, Paul acknowledges that it is Christ who's working in and through him.

[9 : 22] Paul's not claiming an achievement in his own ministry by his own strength. So he says in verse 17, In Christ Jesus then, I have reason to boast of my work for God.

Not in myself, in my education or teaching or eloquence, but in Christ I have reason to boast, for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles.

That is, Paul is in effect saying what he says in 2 Corinthians 4, for example. He's really a jar of clay contained within which is treasure of the gospel.

It is Christ who works fundamentally, not simply Paul. And how does Christ work? Paul goes on at the end of verse 18 to say that Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.

Notice how he refers to word accompanied by deed, both together, that is through the preaching of the gospel backed up by godly living and lives of love.

[10 : 41] And so often sometimes we polarize those as though the real evangelist is somebody who just speaks the word and disappears again. But it's speaking the word which is a powerful word of the gospel but backed up by godly living.

But notice too that it's not simply by deed. There are the words that are necessary as well. The deeds might lead people to the light that they see but they need the word to explain to them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He refers to signs and wonders which, as the New Testament makes clear, were especially marks of being an apostle as Paul is writing of his apostolic ministry in these verses.

And we see several examples in the Acts of the Apostles. By the power of the Spirit of God, he says. Because he acknowledges that conversion is a spiritual work. A work of God or God's Spirit in the hearts and minds of people changing them and bringing them to new birth in Christ.

Notice too how Paul is not separating as so often we do Spirit and Word. So his ministry is a ministry of the Word and deed by the power of the Spirit.

[11 : 55] So it's not simply a Spirit ministry out here separated from the Word of God but nor is it simply a Word ministry ignoring the Spirit of God but rather the powerful Spirit of God taking the powerful Word of God and changing people's hearts and lives thereby.

Paul next goes on to reflect about his strategy in his ministry and mission and some of his principles here I think are important and useful for us still today.

remember that Jesus' command to his apostles at the time of his ascension was to take the Gospel to Jerusalem to Judea the area within which Jerusalem was largely the capital Samaria a bit beyond and less Jewish and then to the ends of the earth to the Gentile world in effect.

To that command Paul has been deliberately obedient. He writes this letter in the late 50s AD from Corinth where he's now making his third visit for those who've been following 2 Corinthians here lately he writes this soon after writing 2 Corinthians it seems and to date he has proclaimed he says in verse 19 the Gospel from Jerusalem as far round as Illyricum which is in modern day Albania Yugoslavia on the Adriatic coast.

it's not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles that Paul ever gets there presumably he's alluding to the fact that he did personally although he may simply be referring to the fact that through his ministry in other places he knows that the Gospel has gone as far as Illyricum maybe through converts in Athens or Corinth who've gone back home to Illyricum or it may be that Paul simply did go there and the Acts doesn't record everything of course that Paul did.

[13 : 49] notice how he defines his strategy in verses 20 and 21 I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news not where Christ has already been named so that I do not build on someone else's foundation but as it is written those who have never been told of him shall see and those who have never heard of him shall understand Paul's in effect a church planter and he's not moving into somebody else's area he's not trying to build on somebody else's work but rather he sees a high strategy for going to places where the gospel is unknown and people have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ he doesn't mean by this that every single village and hamlet and town and city has had a preaching crusade of Paul or another apostle through it in the Acts of the Apostles Paul spends some significant time in Ephesus the main city of Asia Minor in western Turkey as it is today the result of that is that all of

Asia have heard the gospel it doesn't mean every single individual but Ephesus being the the center of trade and business and culture becomes in a sense the hub from which as people are converted in Ephesus through Paul's ministry it spreads all around the entire area as we see the Acts of the Apostles recording Paul's journeys and stays we realize that he chooses significant places mainly cities like Ephesus Philippi Thessalonica Berea Athens Corinth etc as means of bringing the gospel to all the places in the surrounding area but his strategy is in particular of unreached people groups something that a number of mission societies have as part of their strategy as well not that of course reached groups don't need to hear the gospel they do Paul after all is writing about the gospel to the Roman church who've already heard it and there's a church established there but as a high priority for Paul's particular giftings and callings was to go to unreached people groups which is why a number of mission societies we have at

Doncaster support some missionaries in sort of remote part of the former USSR which is largely an unreached people group and we also I think along with many mission societies see the high strategy of supporting missionaries in key cities and universities in cities by way of being a place from which as people become leaders in society and move out from the cities back to other areas will take the influence of the gospel with them and it's why I think Paul's general principles here should flow over into the way we think about our mission support for those involved in mission societies how we actually decide what are priorities for sending people not simply every little need but thinking strategically how will we bring the most influence to this people group this country this city this town and it's why I think so many mission societies are seeing the significance of student ministry of urban ministry as indeed we saw last night from David

Williams as he spoke as well Paul's commitment is not just to keep on preaching the gospel willy-nilly but to think strategically about where he goes and does that it explains why to this point he's never been to Rome he says in verse 22 this is the reason that I've so often been hindered from coming to you he wants to go there but he's never been it's a church planted by somebody else we're not sure who we know nearly a decade earlier than this letter there were Christians in Rome who were expelled at some point along with Jews we don't know how they got there but presumably through ministry in Jerusalem or Antioch or another key city from which people from Rome would come and then go back with the gospel to their hometowns Paul doesn't want to build on someone else's foundation it's not a high priority for him to go to Rome although of course at the end of the Acts the Apostles under arrest he certainly ends up there but Paul goes on to reflect on this strategy but now with no further place for me in these regions

I'm sure there are lots of people yet to be converted but Paul has in a sense started and planted congregations in key places he's built them up to a level where they can keep generating their own life and ministry and grow to maturity and so he's ready to move on to another high strategy unreached group so he says I desire as I have for many years to come to you Spain but not because he wants just to go to Rome but to come to you when I go to Spain which for Paul would have been almost the end of the earth so he anticipates meeting and encouraging the Roman brothers and sisters as he mentioned in the first part of the letter as well but only in a sense in passing on his way to an unreached group then Spain we never know really whether Paul ever got there scholars disagree on that the axe doesn't tell us for I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you so Paul's not going to

[19:09] Rome to build on someone's ministry he's going there for mutual encouragement but also perhaps to be sent on by them that they will support his ministry to an unreached group in Spain part of that sending on I suspect has got financial implications as well Paul I think is hoping that the church in Rome would financially support the ministry to Spain that he's hoping follows in his life to come there I think he reflects another strategy a strategy where existing churches support ministry to people who are unbelievers so that the financial burden does not lie with the unbelievers or the brand new Christians but lies with other churches that's an issue we've seen a few times in 2 Corinthians in sermons here in the last few weeks as well Paul has been under attack in Corinth in fact where he writes this letter from for not charging financially to the Corinthians and he's defended that by saying well the Macedonians have supported me along with my own work so that I'm no burden to you but as that church becomes secure he wants them to be able to give for the sake of other churches and so on the challenge of that for us is that as wealthy westerners we ought to be exceedingly generous for the sakes of planting churches in unreached areas and supporting brand new Christians as well well Paul declares his immediate plans and it's not now to come directly to Rome as we might have thought if we got to this point of verse 24 but rather he says in verse 25 at present however I'm going to

Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints so it's not an evangelistic ministry but it's nonetheless important Macedonia and Achaia so Macedonia would be Philippi Thessalonica Berea Achaia would be perhaps Athens but certainly Corinth have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem now the significance of this is high I mean when we think oh yes this is a bit of charity work why doesn't Paul get the treasurer Erastus to pop over to Jerusalem why not just get a messenger to take money I mean really is this that high strategy but this is highly significant Paul himself goes out of the way out of his way to go back to Jerusalem with the collection from the Greeks and that's because this is more than an act of compassion it is an act of compassion it's a model and challenge for us but it's actually more than that because of what it's modelling is the gospel itself

Gentile Christians now supporting Jewish poor Christians back in Jerusalem you see in a sense the gospel has begun with Jews and from there the Gentiles receive benefit but now in a sense the benefits flowing the other way and Paul by taking this collection himself is showing it's a high priority to mark the unity of Jew and Gentile together and their mutual interdependence something that of course I think has been a controlling theme in this whole letter to the Romans as well he uses the language of sharing or fellowship or koinonia in verses 26 and 27 that those of Macedonia and Maakai have been pleased to share in verse 26 and he reflects that again in verse 27 they're pleased to do this indeed they owe it to them that is the gospel has come from them and now they're giving back to those who are impoverished for if the

Gentiles have come to share have fellowship koinonia in their spiritual blessings they also ought to be of service to them in material things so when I've completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected then I'll set out by way of you to Spain notice how Paul is acknowledging the cheerfulness and pleasure in giving from Gentiles to Jews crossing that big racial gap it's brought together in Christ so it's a model of the gospel but notice too that it's giving to people who are unknown in effect the Gentile Christians wouldn't have known the Jewish Christians in Rome Paul does or at least some of them so they're giving because they recognize that brothers and sisters in Christ are not limited to those whom you know in your church fellowship there is a generosity here across racial divides and ethnic divides to unknown

Christians to relieve their poverty in fact in this case well finally Paul urges prayer for his ministry I appeal to you brothers and sisters in verse 30 by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf because undergirding all of ministry and mission should be prayer another challenge to us as we think about the task of mission Paul prays for two things in particular here indeed the language of prayer the earnest prayer in this translation is that Paul's wrestling with prayer it's not a simple quick prayer but something that's focused and concentrated something that takes effort and the two things for which he asks prayer for rescue from unbelievers maybe a hint of what will happen to him back in Jerusalem as we know from the ends of the Acts of the Apostles referring probably to the hostile

[25 : 05] Jews back in Jerusalem and maybe this prayer is one level answered because his life initially at least was spared the second is that his offering of the money or the ministry in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints you see it's one thing for the Gentile Christians to act rightly and generously in giving to the poor but it's another thing for the Jewish Christians to accept some dependency back on the Gentiles and he's praying in a sense for grace from them in response to the grace of giving from the Gentiles which he himself is conveying back to them we don't know if Paul ever got to Spain writer later in the first century Clement suggests perhaps that he did probably it doesn't matter if it did we'd be told very clearly well Paul has given here I think some issues that explain strategy and thinking in mission it's not simply a sort of casting out of seed willy-nilly and just hoping for the best that something will happen but proper

Christian ministry and mission requires strategic thinking working through what are high priority strategies for Paul that was church planting in particular his call as an apostle to reach unreached groups but to do so in strategic ways to go to cities which will bring more influence to more of the area rather than say to pick a comfortable little village or hamlet somewhere but to see also that ministry of relief of poverty is actually a high priority for Paul that he's modelling that by taking himself personally the gifts from Macedonia and Achaia to Jerusalem but all of this ministry is nothing without Christ working through him and so any boast of Paul is a boast of Christ's work which is why he urges prayer at the end let's pray God our father help us as we think of the needs of our world the needs for the gospel and the needs for relief of the poor to think generously and strategically help us and mission societies whom we support to target the areas that will be the most effective and strategic but Lord

God keep raising up laborers into the harvest we pray for Jesus sake Amen !!! I not T
Christ's week