

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

God's rescue plan

Scripture: Romans 1:1-17

Rev. Steve Filyk

Opening Hymn: Immortal, invisible, God only wise

Choruses: Our God (Tomlin), Everlasting God (Tomlin)

Communion Hymn: how deep the father's love for us

Closing Hymn: The church's one foundation

May 7, 2023

Communion Sunday

Can you think of a few places in town,
 Right here in Kamloops,
 That you wouldn't be caught dead in?

[show some pictures including:
 A downtown bar, a government cannabis store,
 Some sort of adult 'love shop']

Well if you wouldn't be caught dead
 In ones of these places.
 You should know that some people
 Wouldn't be caught dead here.

[show picture of St. Andrew's church]

Most of us are aware that Christianity
 Is no longer in favor in Canada.

The church is associated with the evils of colonialism
 And the misdeeds of Indian Residential Schools.
 The church has been defamed by abusive clergy.
 The church has been painted as intolerant and hateful.

Many people wouldn't be caught dead here.

With this in mind
 You might find it curious
 That in today's reading,
 Paul's proclaims unapologetically:
 "I am not ashamed of the Gospel".

Paul declares this in a world
 That was even less welcoming
 of the Gospel message, than our own.

But before we explore this
 Let me give you some context for his statement.

This letter of Paul is unique among his writings.

It is addressed to a Christian community at Rome,
 A city of a million,
 at the center of the Empire.

This church at Rome was a Christian community

that Paul hadn't planted or visited.

As for the nature of this church it is likely
 That it was composed primarily of Gentile believers
 As the Jewish people
 had been expelled from Rome years earlier,
 And had only been recently welcomed back.

One of Paul's goals was of this letter
 Was to encourage acceptance
 between Jewish and Gentile believers,
 but more importantly it was to unpack
 the meaning and implications of the Gospel.

Romans functions more like an essay than a letter.
 One might call it the Gospel of Paul.

The fact that it likely predates all the Gospels
 [Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John]
 Also indicates that it shaped their understanding
 Of the Good News.

That's some context...

As I mentioned earlier in today's reading
 Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the Gospel.
 This is NOT because he lives in a land
 Where Christianity was popular,
 And it was EASY to say such things.

While Christianity was tolerated by the Empire
 Up to the persecutions of Nero, it wasn't officially accepted,
 and was consider an 'illegal superstition'.

Christians were considered atheists
 Because they wouldn't accept the Greek/Roman
 Pantheon of Gods.

"Some thought Christians practiced cannibalism
 because the sacrament of the [Holy Communion].
 Others believed that Christians practiced incest
 because they preached [about] loving their brothers and sisters.

Many believed Christians hated humanity
 because they kept secrets
 and withdrew from normal social life."ⁱ

And then there was the fact that their leader,
 Jesus, had been crucified.

"In the ancient world, the good news of [a] crucified God
 often evoked horror and outrage.

Crucifixion was not only a gruesome and horrible way to die
 but was also intended to humiliate its victim,

stripping him naked and holding him up (literally!)
to the scorn and ridicule of the crowds...

To suggest that God would allow himself to be abused
in this way was scandalous."ⁱⁱ

Criminals are crucified, not gods.

PAUSE

Imagine how any family might feel
About one of their sons or daughters
Being captivated by a crucified God
And participating in cannibalistic rituals.

Christianity wasn't welcomed by the masses...

But despite this disdain,
Paul is enthused by the Gospel.

Paul talks about a personal obligation to share it with everyone.
Paul tells that church in Rome
that he is eager to preach the Gospel to them.

Paul declares boldly
That he is NOT ashamed of the Gospel.

Given all the negative baggage that Christianity
Carried in this culture
What is Paul so passionate?

In his words:
"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..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul is willing to face the tide of negative opinion
Because in the Gospel he has discovered:

1. God's rescue
2. God's rescue that is for everyone
3. God's rescue that is for everyone who will simply accept it by faith

It is important to realize
That this Gospel is so different
than all the surrounding religions
Of Paul's time and our own.

Most religious are about proving ourselves
worthy to God and to others.

In Paul's day "Traditional religion had taught that life is achieved
by conforming to the rules of righteousness,
[which created a] ferocious competition
for honor that marked the entire ancient world.

If I and my group conform to the law better
than you and your group,
we have honor and you are shameful."^{iv}

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ
The Gospel of the crucified god
Upended this system of competition
Over awards and demerits

Gone is all the striving to prove ourselves worthy.
Jesus does all the heavy lifting for us.

We don't prove ourselves worthy,
We accept the 'gift' of right standing, 'righteousness'
Found in the work of Jesus Christ.

Maybe this is hard for some of us to grasp,
Especially for those who have grown up in the church
And have always believed God has loved
And accepted us as God's children.

What you should know is that there are many others
Even among those in the church
Who have accepted a non-Gospel message
That you need to prove yourself worthy.

You need to meet a certain standard
[Avoid certain sins
And perform certain deeds]

To be acceptable to friends and family and God.

But Paul boldly declares he is not 'ashamed of the Gospel'
Because it overthrows this system of merit
And replaces it with the gift of grace.

It is not our righteousness that matters,
But God's righteousness that matters.

This same God "has graciously acted on our behalf
through Jesus Christ to give us an opening
and access to God's... righteousness...

Our response is to have faith in God through Jesus Christ.
With this, the door to salvation is graciously open
[to all who will believe].

I don't know how many of you watched the Royal Coronation.
In the week before, the royals spend a lot of time
greeting their people,
Chatting in the crowds,

Shaking the hands of well-wishers.

It is important for them to do that,
Because everything else about them
Highlights their difference from everyone.

They live securely in opulent palaces,
Waited on by servants.

They don't worry about how inflation
Will be affecting their pension
Or what they will be eating for supper.

They will always have the best seat at every gathering.
The performance won't start
Till they have arrived.

Our world loves to create distinctions that divide us,
Exalt some, and diminish others.

But in the Gospel, the kingdom of God,
All social distinctions are flattened.
We all find ourselves on the same footing.
We are all welcome to receive the gift of a gracious God.

Let me share with you
How the Gospel has impacted history
Even royal institutions
To proclaim both this leveling and this grace.

Here is the outline of a traditional ceremony
That is used for the Hapsburg emperors and princes in Austria,
Most recently in 2011 for Archduke Otto of Hapsburg-Lorraine.

This is how the ceremony proceeds:

"The Grand Chamberlain knocks three times
with a silver cane on the door of the Capuchin convent
which contains the Imperial crypt.

The Capuchin porter asks:
"Who is there?"

The Grand Chamberlain proclaims
the name and titles of the deceased Hapsburg emperor:

"I am (we will insert the name Christian—I am Christian)
Emperor of Austria,
Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, Dalmatia,
Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia, Lodomeria,
of Illyria, and King of Jerusalem...

Upon hearing this,
the porter refuses to open the door and says:
"I do not know you."

The Grand Chamberlain knocks on the door again
 and in answer to the porter's question
 "Who is there?"
 gives just the name of the deceased prince:

"I am (Christian) ... His Majesty the Emperor and the King. "

The porter again refuses admission:
 "I do not know you."

For a third time, the Grand Chamberlain knocks on the door
 and the porter asks anew, "Who is there?"

This time, the Grand Chamberlain simply says:
 "I am (Christian)... a poor mortal and a sinner."

To this, the Capuchin friar responds:
 Come in."^v

This my friends is why Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel.
 In the Gospel we receive God's grace not because
 Of what honors we might have be born into
 or achieved by our own effort
 But because we recognize our poverty
 and great need.

May God help us see this.
 May God help us receive this.
 Amen and amen.

ⁱ "Constitutional Rights Foundation." 6 May. 2023, www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-13-4-b-religious-tolerance-and-persecution-in-the-roman-empire.

ⁱⁱ Garrett Green, "Theological Perspective on Romans 1:16–17; 3:22b–28 (29–31)," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 1:16,17

^{iv} Robert Jewett *The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and the Epistles* 16-17

^v MDrake. "The Traditional Burial Ceremony of a Hapsburg Prince - Nobility and Analogous Traditional Elites." Nobility and Analogous Traditional Elites, 27 Feb. 2020, nobility.org/2011/07/burial-protocol-austria.