



**Dr Janet Bottoms - 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

**Readings: Romans 12: 1 -13 and 1 Peter 15 -16.**

*On 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024, morning worship at Downing Place URC was led by the church's Evangelism and Service Group, with several contributions from its members. Janet Bottoms offered some Comments on the two scripture readings.*

Romans 12: 1 -13 and 1 Peter 15 -16.

*Evangelism!* It's a difficult word, because it is so often regarded with suspicion - even fear. One respondent to the recent questionnaire about the church's priorities wrote that "evangelism can have the wrong connotations for people"- causing a member of our group to comment that "it's a pity there isn't another word available for it". I think we can all understand these reactions.

And yet – recognizing all that - evangelism is something we, as followers of Jesus, are called to: to *"go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."* (Mark 16:15) Moreover the word itself comes from the Greek words for "good" and "messenger", so to evangelize is to be a "messenger of good" - the good news of God's steadfast, unconditional love, shown in and through Jesus. As our own minister, Nigel, has written "evangelism is an activity for those who believe that in the risen Jesus Christ, God is alive, God is with us, God is for us, through all time and eternity".

This is our calling, in all its simplicity and its depth. As Paul would write in his letter to the church in Corinth: *"in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. . . and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us"* (2 Corinth. 5: 19). How we respond, of course, depends on each one of us, shaped by our personal experiences and abilities and opportunities.

And that is what our reading from Paul's letter in *Romans* is about. Paul says that each one of us has abilities and opportunities and the power to use them as gifts from God, through faith; and we have them both individually, in our homes, work or neighbourhood, and as a united body, the church. *"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace [that is, to the gift, the power] given to us"* (Romans 12:4-6). Paul goes on to list some of them, though we should remember this is not an exhaustive list.

There is the gift of **"prophecy"**, or as the Revised English Bible puts it "the gift of inspired utterance". This is followed by **"ministry"** – not what we call ministry today, but, rather, the gift of "administration" – of serving the practical and spiritual life of the church in many different ways. Then there is the gift of **"teaching"**, which is more or less self-explanatory, but also – a different gift. **"Exhortation"** – meaning counselling or giving encouragement, either within the church or outside it. After that we have **"generosity"** – giving freely, not grudgingly; **"leadership"**, exercised patiently and diligently; and the gift of **"compassion"**, which is loving but practical help for those in need or distress.

In fact, the whole body - the church itself and its members - is to be evangelist in its living, sharing, showing and telling of the love of God to, and at work in the world, through the power of the Spirit. *"Let love be genuine,"* says Paul. *"Be ardent in spirit; rejoice in hope; contribute to the needs of the saints; and extend hospitality to strangers."* Live the good news.

We can read something very similar in the first letter of Peter, but he adds something else: “*Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with reverence and humility.*” As well as sharing in and with the rest of the body, each individual member must be ready, at any time, to speak their faith – and to speak it in their own way, their own words, That, too, is evangelism and what we are called to. Both as part of the body and as ourselves, we must be ready to give “an account of the hope that is in us”. So simple and yet so overwhelming; so good, so liberating, so joyful and yet so difficult to put into words in the ordinary everyday world – in the moment.

The readers of Peter’s letter knew that the challenge might arise at any time. The churches were facing persecution. Christians might be mocked, regarded with suspicion, challenged, threatened, or even thrown into prison. Our circumstances are different, and yet we live in a world and society that is not necessarily sympathetic to our faith; a society where the very language, the words we use may seem strange, even incomprehensible; a society where many people claim to have “no religion”, and some are even actively hostile to Christianity or the Church, often for good, historic reasons.

So how can we be ready, in our own circumstances – family or work or neighbourhood - to give our account of what we believe, and why? How can we be ready to speak it, simply and honestly but, as Peter says, “with reverence and humility” – not arrogantly or aggressively but gently, respectfully, and clearly?

Perhaps this is something that we, as the members of a body, need to talk about with each other, in love. Perhaps we need to find ways in which we can learn from each other, and help each other both to find the words and to have the confidence to speak in that moment when the way is opened. Perhaps in helping each other we may also find ourselves growing in understanding of our faith; rediscovering it, freshly and more deeply, and so growing in the mercy and the grace of God

We began our reading from Paul to the church in Rome with his great appeal. “*I appeal to you therefore - brothers and sisters - by the mercies of God - to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*” Stop thinking about yourselves and think instead of God’s love and God’s power. Let yourselves go. Do we, can we, do that?

Are we too tired - too busy - too shy – too afraid of sounding “*churchy*” - simply too embarrassed to talk about God’s love in Jesus in front of the people we share our daily lives with? Are we too anxious to “fit in”?

“*Do not be conformed to this world*”, begs Paul, “*but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*” New – a new birth in the renewing of our minds – our ways of seeing: to learn, to grow and to share the gifts of grace with the world that God loves so much. Let us strive, as Peter told his readers, to be always ready under the guidance of God, to speak of that love, with love, whenever, wherever we are called to do so. And to God be all the glory. Amen.

Take, oh, take me as I am;  
summon out what I shall be;  
set your seal upon my heart  
and live in me.

John L. Bell  
Church Hymnal, Hymn 795

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