



Proper 18, Year A – July 31, 2011

Romans 9.1-5

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

The honest truth is that St Paul has had singularly bad luck preaching Jesus to his own people. The Gentiles receive his message with enthusiasm; his fellow Jews, by contrast, give him a hard time at every turn. And it is devastating to him.

This is the gist of the short passage we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred...they are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises... from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah... – Romans 9.2-5

Paul just cannot fathom how his own people, who are God's beloved Chosen, do not see in Jesus what he sees in Jesus. And he would give up anything, even his own relationship with Jesus if it would help.

With only the slightest twist, this is surely the lament of many in our churches today: Where have all the young people gone? Why don't my adult children come to church? Why do they not see in Christ, in Christianity, in the Church, what I see?

I do think it is worth asking what prompts these kinds of questions. I sometimes fear that what worries us most is that the Church isn't as big as we'd like it to be (or used to be). We worry that its future is in jeopardy, that there won't be enough resources to keep things going. Or maybe we are lamenting that something we have valued means so little to our children and neighbours.

But do you see that all of this is really quite self-centred, and has very little at all to do with what needs to be passed on to a new generation? No one is going to join the Church because the Church needs bodies. No one is going to join the Church because the Church needs money. No one is even going to join the Church because it happens to be important to *us*. That's like saying I should take up putting Marmite on my toast because it would make my Australian friends happy! I've tried Marmite, and trust me, it's not happening!

But let us return to Paul. Paul is not upset because the Church isn't as big as it could be, but because he believes his kin are missing something which has been absolutely life-changing for him.

In other words, the question we need to be asking ourselves is, What, at the core of our being, does our faith mean to us? Why do I choose to follow the way of Jesus? What stories and convictions are so engraved on my heart that they shape everything from how I see and interpret the world and its events to how attuned I am to the "God-ness" within and around me. What is there about my faith that is so life-changing I would sacrifice it, so that someone I loved could have it? Answer that question, and you'll know what needs to be passed on to a new generation.

Today [at 10.30], we will admit to the company of the "faith-full" Sophia Clare B. We make this beginning, as we make all beginnings, with great

expectations and high hopes that she will respond to the prayers, teaching and above all the Christian example of those who love her, that one day, she may attain to the fullness of the stature of Christ. And this is an *auspicious* beginning, surrounded as Sophia is by a community of people who have endeavoured to keep faith from the time of their own baptism, and who will place her under the sign of the cross, and vow to support her in this journey.

It is a long and arduous assignment to bring a child up in the Christian faith. To say Yes, Church is as important as hockey. To get children into the habit of prayer. To say, In this family, we don't keep everything for ourselves. Or, In this family, we practise forgiveness when we hurt each other. Or, In this family we have a special concern for the kid nobody likes at school. And so on.

It isn't easy. Paul didn't find it easy either. It isn't easy to be steady and consistent, especially when you haven't the energy to push back against the pushing-back. It isn't easy to be a good example – because we are, all of us, flawed. And it isn't easy, sometimes, for no other reason than that we are too close to the situation. A parent is like a prophet in his or her own country – that is, “without honour.” But that, my friends, is where other Christians come into play. Paul had no luck at all with his fellow Jews. But Peter did. And James. It is amazing how many deeply committed Christians point to the winning influence of someone other than a parent – a camp counselor, a Sunday School teacher, a fabulous youth leader. In this parish some of our most committed people came up through Prayer Partners.

No wonder we make sure the community is present at a baptism, and that we ask them to pledge their support to any who undertake this challenge.

Paul offers one other point for our consideration. We are, without doubt, called to engage as many people as we possibly can in Jesus' project to re-create the world as God intended it to be. Sometimes we score; and sometimes we don't. But remember this. The people Paul bore on his heart (his fellow Jews), whether or not they were persuaded by his love for Jesus, are God's chosen and beloved. God will not take back his word. And the same is true of anyone who is grafted into the body of Christ: once we are adopted into the family of God, we are just that: family! We can “move out,” as it were, but that does not alter the fact that we continue to be God's beloved. For nothing, says Paul (we heard this last week), whether height nor depth, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That goes for us, who are present. And it goes for those who are absent, too.

And this – more than a full church, more than resources aplenty, more than everybody liking all the things I like – this is what really matters.