

“THE GOOD BOOK – 4: WORDS TO LIVE BY”

Romans 11:33 – 12:2

Do you remember English at school? For some of us the memories might be more hazy than for others. One of the things I remember being taught in English was how to write a letter – you had to set it all out in a certain way, with the address, the greeting, the main part, a few words of closure and an appropriate signing off (“Yours faithfully, sincerely, truly, etc.”) If you use a computer you may find that stupid animated paperclip popping up every time you type “Dear ...” and offering to help you set out your letter. You can recognise the letter form, though, and you know that it’s likely to be something that is personal to you, with something personal from the writer. So you read it knowing that it’s a letter, written for a particular reason in a specific context.

Well, we’ve been looking at the kinds of writing in the Bible over the past few weeks and observing that you don’t read all of them in the same way. Poetry’s different from history. Law is different from prophecy. And today we’re just going to have a quick look at the letters in the Bible and see what we can take from them that will help us living our lives today. They’re all in the New Testament part of the Bible and most of them are written by Paul – although John, Peter, Jude and an unnamed writer who addressed the Hebrews are also involved.

They also follow a fairly clear pattern, similar to our letters, but common to other contemporaries. I had the added benefit (or burden) of reading letters in Latin while I was at school and university – from people like Pliny and Cicero – and I can tell you that Paul’s letters are very much like theirs. The writer puts his name at the top of the letter (which would help today – then we’d know whether to read any more of it!), then a few words of greeting. Paul usually continues with some words of thanks and praise, before getting on to the main point of what he has to say. At the end there are some personal remarks and final words of closure. Sometimes the letters are to individuals, such as Timothy or Philemon, sometimes to groups of people, such as the Corinthians or the Ephesians.

The thing about letters, though, is that they usually deal with particular situations, they’re written with a specific occasion in mind. So Paul may be writing because he’s hoping to visit one of these groups, or because he’s heard some bad reports about them and he wants to set things straight. They’re also written at a particular time, in a particular culture, so we need to be careful just how we interpret the things that are said. In the letters of the New Testament, and Paul’s letters in particular, the main part of what Paul has to say is to do with what he believes – and what he contends that followers of Jesus should believe. But he then goes on to apply that, to show what kind of difference that belief should make in a Christian’s life. And in most of his letters it’s pretty obvious where he begins to make that kind of connection.

The few lines we've just read from his letter to the Christians in Rome are from just that point. Paul wrote the letter because he was hoping to visit the Roman church on the way to Spain, but as he didn't know any of them, he thought he ought to let them know exactly what he believed. And he spends the first eleven chapters of the letter (of course, there were no chapter and verse divisions in the original) setting out his belief about God and humanity and Jesus – and what the connections are between them. He rounds that off with a short poetic burst of praise, using quotations from the Old Testament in what was probably an early Christian song. It's all about how great God is.

The next paragraph (the beginning of our chapter twelve) starts with a great big “*Therefore*”. OK, he's saying, this is what we believe as Christians, but if we say we believe that, then it's got to have some kind of effect on the way we live. What we say we believe has to make a difference. In the first couple of sentences of chapter 12, he talks about **submission to God** (“*living sacrifices*”) and **transformation by God** (“*be transformed*”). You've got to let it change you.

Baptism is, if you like, a “therefore moment”. In baptism, the person being baptised is saying (and those of us who have been baptised can say once again) that they hold to a certain body of belief and that they now commit themselves to living in the light of that belief. It's not an easy thing to do what Marie is doing this morning – up here in front of scores of people, speaking of her faith and then undergoing this strange ritual before friends and strangers alike. You've got to be serious about it.

And you've got to be serious, too, about the implications of it. Something is happening in baptism which means that you will never be the same again. Whatever happens to you in the future, wherever you end up, however you progress in your faith, you cannot get away from the fact that you have been baptised. And that difference should be obvious to others. What Marie is saying in the act of baptism is “I believe in Jesus Christ and all that he stands for - and now it's going to make a difference to me.”

The difference, as we've already hinted at, is twofold if we take Paul's words here. Firstly, there is to be a difference in our **behaviour**. Paul writes of offering “*bodies as living sacrifices*”. A sacrifice is something that is wholly devoted to God. It is his and his alone. But in this case, unlike the animal sacrifices to which Paul would have been accustomed as a good Jew, it's a “*living*” sacrifice. The devotion to God has to be lived out each and every day. And as it is lived out in our bodies, that should be seen by others, noted by them as a sign of our commitment to Jesus Christ. You cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ if it makes no difference at all to the way you live your life. There should be a distinctiveness about what you do and say – and about what you do **not** do and say – that marks you off as someone who wants to follow God's instruction for life – the User's Guide to life that is our Bible.

But the change is to be seen not only in behaviour, but also in **attitude**. Paul tells his readers to ensure that they start to think differently too. Don't follow the fashions and fads of the culture in which you live – a culture which is very probably founded on quite different values from those of the Kingdom of God. But follow the way of life that God recommends. The messages with which we are constantly bombarded day by day – through the media, through advertising, through the attempts by government to persuade us of certain things, through the pressure of our peers – are message that can very easily lead us down a road of individualism, of rationalism, of what some have called “functional atheism” (you can cope without worrying about God). Even many of the people who congregate within our churches on Sunday are like that – “I do my bit for God by worshipping him for an hour or so each week; the rest of the time I can safely ignore him.” Don't be fooled, no-one can safely ignore God.

Rob Lacey's paraphrase of the Bible – called *The Street Bible* (I think it's been republished as *The Word On The Street*) – translates these few lines in this way:

“So I say – and I can't say it strong enough – with all this ‘God writing off our mess’ in mind: give it up for God – your life; give it up. Like sacrifices, only live ones. Put your body on the butcher's block, your neck in the noose and let God's hand hold the controls. This is what ‘being spiritual’ means; this is worship – making God smile. Don't get moulded by what the adverts say you should have/should do/should be. Keep on becoming more and more outstanding – literally, standing out, as your thinking's freshened up, regular.”

That's what Marie is saying through all this today. She'll answer a couple of questions, the first of which is to confirm what she believes and the second is about serving God, living for him, allowing her belief to shape her behaviour. And neither makes sense without the other: you can't say you believe something without it affecting your life. And you can't try and live differently without believing that there's a reason for that way of living. It's a huge “therefore moment”. Marie is prepared to take it. Many of you have taken it already – renew that commitment to living as God wants this morning. Some of you haven't – well, give it some serious thought this morning, and if you want to explore it further, come and have a word with me afterwards.