

My initial response when reading today's passages was "What on earth do I say about these?" The reading from Romans looks difficult while the Gospel is one of those that it's hard to say anything new about because it is so well known. Gradually though something came through so here goes, let's see if I can say something that makes sense of these passages.

Let's start with the Gospel. Jesus has just heard that John the Baptist has been killed. We don't know exactly what relation, if any, John was to Jesus, but we are told that Mary and Elizabeth were related (Luke 1:36) though we are not told how. Whether or not they were related, the death of John appeared to affect Jesus, leading him to "withdraw by boat to a solitary place" (13). Unfortunately for Jesus, the crowds hear about what he is doing and rush to the place he is going, not willing to give him time to himself, seeking healing or to hear what he is going to say next.

I don't know about you, but if I had tried to get away for a bit of a quiet time and discovered that other people were not willing to give me that space, I'd probably snap at them. Or, if I didn't want to actively complain, I might give them the cold shoulder, ignore them and hope that they got the message that I wanted to be alone.

Jesus however, "had compassion on them and healed their sick" (14). Despite wanting time to himself, Jesus saw the need in the crowd and put aside his own desires in order to help and serve those that had, in all honesty, intruded on his time.

After Jesus had spent time healing those that had come to him, the disciples approach him with a practical problem. This was a huge crowd (remembering from a previous sermon that the Royal Albert Hall seats about 5,200) and it was getting late. These people would be getting hungry soon and that needed dealing with before night drew in and travelling became more dangerous. Again, Jesus doesn't focus on his ease but on the needs of those around him and he provides for them what they require at that time. It may not have been a banquet, bread and fish would have been simple fare, but everyone had sufficient.

Throughout this reading Jesus has been focusing on what is needed by those around him. Our reading from Romans has a similar outward focus. Paul is reflecting on the situation that he saw the Jews in. If we miss off the first 3 verses, it sounds like an outpouring of praise. "Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah" (4-5).

However, Paul is grieving over the Israelites. He sees these people that have had all these benefits, all this history and weeps. The only possible reason Paul could have to weep over them is that despite possessing "the human ancestry of the Messiah", they are refusing to believe in that Messiah, Jesus, and so they are rejecting the offer of life that can only be received through acceptance of Jesus.

Being Paul, we can't imagine that he would be satisfied with just weeping over the failure of the Jews to accept Jesus, he would have been doing everything in his power to convert them, to help them to recognise that Jesus was the fulfilment of everything that they recognised as God's movement throughout their national history. Paul says that he would be willing not only to give up his life for the Jews, but even his chance of eternal life if that was what it would take.

We do know that he did try to reach the Jews wherever he went. We are told in Acts 17, that Paul made it his custom when he arrived in a city that had a synagogue to go there and reason with them, trying to persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah. Often, as in Acts 17, it would be the Jews that would rouse up the rabble to force Paul to leave a city or that plotted to try to kill him.

What I would like us to ask ourselves today though is “What are we willing to go through for those around us?”

As I see it, this has a number of issues which are related here. The first is are we open enough to those around us to recognise what their needs are? It's far too easy not to really get to know those around us. Lockdown has made visiting and chatting with people harder, but even before that it could be tricky. We all tend to live such busy lives that it can be a challenge to make the time to talk to our friends and neighbours and find out about them. If we don't know them, we don't have a hope of knowing what their struggles are and so we can't look at how we can help them.

The second issue is that once we know what those around us need, what are we willing to do to help? Jesus put aside his desire for solitude when the crowds flocked to him for healing. Paul repeatedly reached out to those that attacked him. What will we do?

It doesn't have to be a big thing. It might be making a phone call to someone that's feeling lonely. It might be putting a box of cookies outside someone's door when they're feeling down. It might mean carrying a burden for a group of people and bringing them repeatedly and earnestly before God. However, it could also be a life-changing event such as giving up your way of life to go and reach out to a group of people that have no other way of hearing about what Jesus has done for them, here in the UK or in another country.

Each person's call from God will be different. The people we are called to witness to will be different and the methods we are called to use will be different. However, we can be sure that God wants to use us to bring others to know him or to know him better. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we are willing to be open, to God and to those around us, and will allow God to work through us.

I'd just like to finish with some of the words of the song “I the Lord of sea and sky” and you might want to make the words of the chorus your own prayer of availability to God.

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin,
My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.

Amen.