

## **ROMANS 10:8-13 “A BEAUTIFUL BUT BLEAK CONDITION”**

**AIM:** The aim of the sermon is to give a quick, informed introduction to the text, raising the issue of the relation of Christianity to Judaism through the way in which Paul quotes from the Old Testament. The central point is the drawing near and claiming, and the breaking away. The existential address has to do with the need and opportunity to declare ourselves through speech, and the opportunity to invest oneself and life in the belief of the significance of our own living.

### **SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT**

I asked a group of people last week who were studying this text, how many of them received and read letters and how many of them write and send letters. How many of you receive and read letters? How many of you write letters?

I asked because I wonder if we appreciate, in the reading of the epistle texts of the lectionary, that we are reading letters and think about how letters are unique. I write letters and I sometimes write letters to a group of people with whom I have become friends and colleagues over the course of my life. We tend to read these letters of Paul, that will be the appointed texts for the Lenten season, as documents written for posterity. Rather, I think, like almost all letter writing, there is a specific audience in mind and there is always a given bond between the writer and the reader of letters. Thus letters are deeply grounded in time and place and they are deeply embedded in the relationship that has existed between the writer and the readers. The content of the letters is going to be

determined by this relationship, so what is raised in the letters is immediate rather than general. Letters will deal with specific people, they will deal with specific issues that trouble the individuals or the community for whom the letter is written. A letter will try to address discontents, disputes, failings of real people in real communities. Behind letters of this sort is the awareness that human community is a frail and fragile thing and can break, like a fine wine glass, with the slightest of impacts. Keeping these things in mind help, I think, appreciate what we are reading when we are dealing with these Pauline epistles over the weeks of Lent.

With respect to this text, there are a couple of observations that I think it important to note. The text, not always apparent on first reading, consists in large measure of quotations from Old Testament sources. There is a quotation from Deuteronomy and two from Isaiah. We are so familiar with some of these things that we miss what can be quite jolting about them. At the center of what Paul has to say, which occupies his interest in all of these epistles, is the place of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, in the life of the fledgling communities to which Paul writes. So, with no effort expended, Paul draws from these Old Testament sources snatches which can be smoothly integrated into his declaration about Jesus Christ as the Lord. There are a couple of things that need to be made note of. First of all, it is certainly the case that Paul wants to use these Old Testament text to support his claims about Jesus. It is something of a litany in New Testament writings to say something like, “it was said of old...” and make it applicable to a declaration about Jesus. To do this was to use a device common. The authenticity of a declaration or a statement was supported if it could be shown that it adhered to ancient

wisdom. So the new community of Christians, struggling to survive and to find their way in the ancient world, were encouraged by such assertions by Paul that what is at the center of their belief could be supported by texts from the Old Testament.

Now we all know that such belief was not shared by the larger community of Judaism in which the church came to be. There was and probably still is, some deep discontent about the use of the resources at the center of the life of Judaism as support for a movement which in effect broke away from Judaism. It only stands to reason that claims such as Paul about Old Testament texts would be resented.

Yet we are also clear, that at the same time Paul uses the resources of Judaism to bolster his claims about Jesus, he was in a battle with Judaism and he was out to construct a revolution in Judaism. It was in fact in Paul's lifetime, or shortly afterwards, that the effort to revolutionize Judaism with the gospel of Jesus Christ failed and the new religion became a phenomenon of the Gentiles. We see in Paul both a drawing near to Judaism which was a dominant part of the culture in which Paul did his work, and a moving away from the same while at the same time using its treasures as part of the tradition of the new community. I find this an incredibly interesting model and have wondered over the last week while working on this text if it is something that should be explored for the relationship of the church to the dominate culture in America.

### **THE BEAUTIFUL BUT BLEAK CONDITION**

I want to call our attention to one of the declaration that Paul makes in this text, one deeply familiar to us and deeply ingrained in our tradition. “But what does it say? ( And this is the first quote of the text, coming from Deuteronomy) The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is the word of faith we preached); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

In the concluding phrase of this quote, ..”If you confess with your lips that Jesus Chris is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” contain two very different kinds of statements.

A. Confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord... There is an old acquaintance of mine, a Swiss, who taught at McCormick Seminary in Chicago and then at Temple University in Philadelphia, who wrote a book titled The Serpent and the Dove. The book is about the relationship of early Christianity to Roman culture. A major portion of the book is on the history of martyrdom. He demonstrates that the real crime of the growing Christian community is located in the declaration of this text, that Jesus Christ is Lord. It was concluded by the Roman culture that it was held together by the consent of all the people expressed in a declaration about the office of Emperor...That Ceasar was Lord. In that declaration was assumption on the part of the citizens that they accept the parameters, laws, practices, aims of the Roman culture as their own. In this acceptance was the foundation of the Roman culture. What they heard from the lips of the followers of Jesus that Jesus Christ was Lord

was a direct threat to the foundation of the Roman culture. And indeed it was. The martyrs were those who recognized that when they said Jesus Christ is Lord it was to make a revolutionary statement and they decided to attach their very lives to expressions of their lips.

For the most part, I fear, my life is lived within parameters established by other powers and authorities. It is the habit of human beings and of our brains, to make short cuts so that our lives in the world are more efficient and compact. The forces which tend to set the parameters of our lives are the economic interests of institutions which depend upon how we spend our disposable income. Our lives fall into patterns which meet the ends of these interests and institutions. But sometimes we are brought up short by a glimpse of how we are living our lives, the parameters that have been set for us, the practical values or habits which determine much of our ordinary behavior, and we wonder what is happening to our lives, what we have done with them. And sometimes we see that the lives we have been given, that we have for this all too brief and fleeting time, and these relationships we have and that we could have, require of us some decision and some declaration of allegiance. Is that not, after all, what it is when we confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is not a statement of fact. It is a declaration about our own lives, the parameters which shall be set, the rules by which our lives will be shaped, what we will turn our eyes and our minds to. Sometimes we find ourselves able to take our own lives in our hands and declare in some form, what we shall do with what we have. We need to spend a good deal of time thinking about what this means. I know that part of what it means is the recognition that what is important in life is not what we make,

create, build or earn; what is important in life is what is given as a great and free gift and that Jesus is Lord is a declaration that the substance of my life is made up of the recognition of what has been freely granted; the tradition in which I am grounded and which has educated me, the coming into full and realized life of my children, the first light of the rising sun on the eastern horizon when I go out to get the paper off my front lawn, the bonds between myself and my friends and colleagues, the community of the church; the list is endless.

**B.** The second element in the text I have cited is "...and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead." This is a very different kind of statement from the first. The first is not about statement of facts. It is a statement about the condition of my own heart. But this seems to be a statement about fact. I have read deeply in the sciences over the last several years and know, first that our beneath the expressions of our culture is the foundation of science and science has a certain way of approaching and understanding things which is the one that has triumphed and made life in the west the richest and healthiest in all of history. Issues of fact are not decided by believe, they are decided by a very precise kind of method. So what is it that is said here. I will set aside for the time being the possible rancorous debate and suggest what I believe is being asserted.

While science has allowed us an unprecedented power over the world in which we live, and has other implications we do not often look upon. It came alive for me this past summer in an event at Bordy Vineyards in Baltimore County. Each Saturday evening of the summer Bordy hosts an evening of food and music on its grounds. It begins before

sundown and goes to about 9:00. A band plays on the patio of one of the buildings and the guests sit on a grassy sloop that rises from the bandstand to the edge of one of the fields. There are stands that sell foods and wine and people bring picnics. We went one night with my wifes family and my family and colleagues of mine from Towson University. There must have been 30 of us. There was a Cajun band playing and after we had eaten and had some wine and darkness had fallen, we danced. My two youngest grandchildren, the children of my youngest daughter were on the dance floor, the concrete patio, dancing with their father. He had Carl on his shoulders and Abigail he held by her hand. I did not see what happened, but some misstep caused the children to begin to fall. My attention was focused when I heard the thump of both children hit the concrete. After a period of time of great concern, it was determined that the kids were OK. I watched my daughter and son-in-law comfort and care for the kids; determine if they were seriously injured, and then hold and comfort them. I realized something in an intimate way that night. There are certain laws of matter and motion into which we can fall, and once we do, there is not amount of wishing, hoping, yearning, believing or praying will make any difference. The laws that govern matter and motion are perfectly deaf to our cries and prayers and are perfectly indifferent to our yearnings and desires. On the macro and scientific scale, our mastery of the mysteries of the physical world overturns our old assumptions about the special place of human beings in the universe. When we see this, we nevertheless lay claim to a belief that cannot be proven, that our lives matter, that the quest for meaning is to be pursued with all the passion we can muster, that our conviction that there is a place for us in the midst of the great expanses of the universe must be held

fast in our hearts. I think there is something of this in the call to believe that God raised him from the dead.

The title for the sermon today is taken from an Emily Dickinson poem. The first stanza goes Wonder- is not precisely knowing/ and it is not precisely Knowing not/ it is a beautiful but bleak condition/He has not lived who has not felt.

These dense lines capture some of what this text from Paul conveys. To confess with our lips and to believe is not to have things proved. It is to say that our certitude is not the same thing as absolute certainty. What we cling to is not something substantive which we can prove and document. Once it is thought to be proved and documented it no longer lives. Only when it is described as “beautiful but bleak” do we capture the fragile and character of that which lay at the center of human living and that which opens life to its full beauty and mystery.

Amen