

102 Terrible four-letter words

Well, I've finally managed to get some bigger batteries, and so I've been able to fly my drone up over the whole of the Romans mountain chain – and what glorious sights I've seen. I admit there was a degree of 'sameness' – a bit like how I felt in 1999, when I went on a cycling tour of Norway: 'Not *another* stunning lake/mountain view!' But Paul *is* a bit repetitious.

So what did I see from the drone? As I've said, I saw a book written to Christians, about the gospel, how it was about faith (trust) from beginning to end (Rom 1) – we must trust God because God's got a plan to bring blessing to the whole world. And God chooses people through whom to bring that blessing, first the Jews, then supremely Jesus, then the extended 'Jewish' family, as God grafted the Gentiles in, so that we could, together, bring blessing to the whole world.

But Paul is worried because he sees things going horribly wrong. God's people are starting to use terrible four-letter words! The Pharisees (Paul was one such, and I feel a strong affinity here!) studied the scriptures '*because you presume that by them you possess eternal life. These are the very words that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*' (Jn 5:39,40) Instead, the Pharisees railed against what 'they' were doing, how 'they' were breaking God's laws, and that 'they' needed to do this and not do that, or 'they' would be judged.

Paul wrote Romans, which was aimed squarely at Christians who, seeing the awful things that 'they' were doing (Rom 1), were becoming judgemental and hypocritical (Rom 2). You religious people aren't any better than 'they' are, he says in Rom 3, we're **all** sinners – yes, that includes **you**, my dear fellow believers!¹ It's not about being right and boasting; it's about trusting God (having faith), like Abraham (Rom 4) and Jesus (Rom 5). Don't think in terms of punishment (Rom 6); it's about life that comes by trusting God.² You religious people were 'married' to 'being good' (Rom 7) but you can be gloriously freed (Rom 8) to be 'married' to the Spirit. Yes, life is full of suffering because of sin, but by trusting (not by being 'right'), you can be 'more than conquerors'.

What about the actual physical Jews (Rom 9–11)? God's plan has always been the same – to bring blessing to the whole world through God's people, by grafting us into the family of God's covenant people. So the Jews are very special.³

Therefore, live in the freedom that trust (faith) brings – love, rejoice, serve (Rom 12) and live well as part of society, obeying the authorities⁴ (Rom 13). Remember that we're all different and we won't agree about everything (Rom 14), but we're a family, a community, so bear with each other and **stop passing judgement** on each other.⁵

¹ So we use Rom 3:23 (addressed to believers) to tell 'them' that 'they' are sinners. Doh!

² So we use Rom 6:23 (addressed to believers) to tell 'them' that 'they' are under God's condemnation – '**the wages of sin!**' Doh!

³ And look how Christians have historically treated 'them'! Well, 'they' killed Jesus, and 'they' deny that Jesus is Lord.

⁴ But 'they' are permitting awful things, such as abortion and homosexuality, and 'they' are taking away Christians' rights. Surely we should stand up against 'them' – be salt and light, as Jesus said!

⁵ But 'they' are teaching things that are against (my interpretation of) the Bible, so 'they' will have to leave our church. Or if 'they' are the leaders, we'll have to set up a new church, one that sticks to the true gospel, because 'they' are preaching 'another gospel' and so should be condemned (Gal 1:9).

Bear with each other and (Rom 15) **stop passing judgement** on each other. In particular, Jews and Gentiles should work together because we are all the true Jews – the covenant community of God. And watch out for those who cause divisions but stick to the gospel I taught you⁶ (Rom 16).

You see what I mean about Paul, in Romans, being a bit repetitive? He is desperate for them to live as an open, non-judgemental community, to include, not exclude people, to unite around the good news, and for Jews and Gentiles to be ‘one in Christ Jesus’, a loving community.

And in other news... I wonder what Paul would think of our political systems (UK or worldwide), with all those terrible four-letter words – it’s all about what ‘they’ are doing and saying, and it leads to polarisation and an inability to accept that we are all different and won’t all agree, but let’s be an open, accepting community and try to work together for the common good, rather than trying to exclude ‘them’ by building metaphorical or literal walls.

And I’ve been fascinated to (proof)read Tim’s papers and his website, where he’s stressing exactly the same sort of thing: the importance of community – a school should be a learning community where everyone is learning and sharing and growing together, and that means teachers **and** parents, as well as pupils. And this is despite our differences – or maybe even enhanced by our differences. Tim thinks there is hope for society if we can work together and stop being judgemental. (But I think, personally, he does have problems with the church. Why? Because of our judgementalism. Doh!)

Certainly, that’s what I have valued most about St Edmund’s – a breadth of theological views, but everyone working together to make sure that any newcomer feels welcome.

And a fascinating personal footnote is that it was only after gradually realising my own keen ability as a Pharisee that I have personally met some of ‘them’: I had never personally known any gay couples before – now I know two – and I’ve recently got to know a lovely Muslim lady; then just this past week, I’ve been asked to edit the autobiography of a Holocaust survivor, co-written by a Jewish lady whom I ‘met’ through my computer programming (macros).

Finally, I’d like to apologise to any of you that I’ve upset by my own judgemental attitudes, displayed in these articles. Please bear with me as I too am on a journey!

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⁶ (I hope this isn’t being judgemental but ...) As I have said repeatedly, ‘the gospel’ is not the accurately defined mechanism of penal substitution; we need to trust that the full good news is held in the narrative of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; this gives us life, in all its fullness.