

342 Check the context!

When digging with the Caistor Roman Project, I'd be thrilled if I found a Roman coin or a brooch. We'd then need to interpret that find to know what it actually meant. But we'd need to know exactly *where* I found it – we call that the context – in order to see what was going on at Caistor almost 2000 years ago. But if someone found a piece of Victorian pottery close by, I'd be gutted because our interpretation would have to be very different.

So, on my quest for a more positive approach to faith,^[340,1] I've been reading about the 'good news' that Paul is definitely not ashamed of, and this morning a lightbulb flashed on: If Paul thought – as I *used* to think – that 'the gospel' was simply a means of gaining personal salvation and 'going to heaven', why would anyone actually be *ashamed* of it?! To me, that confirms that our interpretation needs to change, and I (following Tom Wright) say we need to change *back* to the 'good news' that the early church announced.

'Whoa! I'd better just check the context.' Within seconds, I crashed into two issues that I've struggled with these past few years: the wrath of God^{Rom 1:18} and the gay issue.^{1:26,27} Worse still, those verses are context-linked to my more positive good news;¹⁻¹⁷ starting with, 'For...' (as in 'because...') and 'So...' (as in 'therefore'). Drat, I hate negativity!

What's more, the text about gay actions is very plain – graphic, even – 'uncleanness', 'shameful desires', 'dishonoured', 'natural...unnatural', 'inflamed with lust', 'shameless acts', 'received repayment'. Couldn't be clearer – no wonder God is full of wrath. But I read on into chapter 2 and looked at Paul's *overall* argument, and the context changed.

Paul's list in the first chapter is things that are *clearly* wrong, his own anger reflecting that of God's wrath, but he then moves on to say about two different groups, Jews and Greeks – those who have the benefit of God's revelation and those who don't. He says they will be judged differently. After that terrible list of wicked ways Paul admonishes the Christians:

But if you judge those who do them and yet you do them yourself, do you suppose that you will escape God's judgment?^{2:3}

But by your hard, unrepentant heart you are building up a store of anger for yourself on the day of anger^{2:5}

But when people act out of selfish desire, and do not obey the truth, but instead obey injustice, there will be anger and fury.^{2:8}

And that last too, I think, must be aimed at Christians, because people who haven't been given the truth can't be accused of not obeying it!

OK, we've got hold of the overall context – how Christians will be judged for their wrong attitudes... and actions, so with the help of Tom Wright's '*Paul for everyone*' commentary, next time, I'll focus on the much-quoted Romans 1:26,27 – but *in context*!