

Sunday 9th March 2025

Practicing The Way – Week 2

Spiritual formation Part 1: What is Shaping Us?

Romans 11:33-12:2 – Not conformed, but transformed

Introduction

Our context

Look at the news, and it is hard not to get depressed about the state of the world. Wherever you turn, things seem to be falling apart. At the moment this is not affecting us directly, but our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering a lot, in Sudan, in Palestine and in Ukraine.

Or we may be afflicted by something much closer to home: a broken relationship, the loss of someone very close to us, a break-up, an inability to find work. It may be some injustice that we have heard about, or someone in our lives is facing. Whatever it is, we face the same question: How do we respond when the forces of evil seem to be winning, and forces of good are under attack or in retreat?

We might be tempted to respond in a similar way to the prophet Habakkuk:

2 How long, Lord, must I call for help,

but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, 'Violence!'

but you do not save?

3 Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;

there is strife, and conflict abounds.

4 Therefore the law is paralysed,
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

Context of Romans

When Paul was writing Romans, he was also feeling depressed about the state of things around him. Now the issue he was wrestling with was quite specific, but it's worth going into a bit. He explains in chapter 9:

9 I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – **2** I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. **3** For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, **4** the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. **5** Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.

The thing that was getting Paul down was that the Jews, his people, were not recognising the Messiah, Jesus, for who he was, and giving their lives to him. He is so upset that he wishes he was cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his people...

What is God doing? Paul is saying. What is he playing at? Jesus is God's king, and yet God's very people can't see it.

That is not how Paul, or indeed we, might imagine things happening. We might think it would be much more efficient for everyone to believe in Jesus' message. But God has other ideas.

We might experience the same thing when those very close to us have no faith, or point blank refuse to engage. It can feel so alienating: people that you are so close to in many ways, have shared the same upbringing, perhaps, do not share with you the thing that is perhaps of deepest significance to you, your faith.

Over the next couple of chapters Paul discusses this problem at length, and I encourage you to read these chapters later if you are interested.

But Paul concludes this part of his letter with this incredible doxology, at the end of chapter 11, which forms the first part of the passage we are looking at this morning:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

34 'Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

35 'Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?'

36 For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory for ever! Amen.

Paul revels in the unexpected ways of the Lord. He just doesn't do things the way we expect. Why is that? And what effect should that have in our lives?

This is the question we are going to be looking at in detail this morning.

We cannot comprehend the mind of God

Let's have a look at the first two verses from our passage:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

34 'Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

Verse 34 may even sound vaguely familiar from some other passages in the Bible: in fact it's a quote from Isaiah 40. Verse 13 to be precise. This is how it goes in the latest NIV translation:

13 Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord,
or instruct the Lord as his counselor?

14 Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge,
or showed him the path of understanding?

These are framed by Isaiah as a question, but the implication is that everyone knows the answer: Nobody taught God these things. God is inscrutable. God does not need our advice. He thinks in a way that is completely different from us. In fact, God's independence from us goes further than this. Now, in verse 35, Paul quotes from the book of Job:

35 'Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?'

God is no one's debtor: we cannot bribe God, by giving him something and hoping for something in return. Why?

36 For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory for ever! Amen.

He is the creator. He made everything. None of us would exist without him, and that also means that we can't control him, even with what seem to us to be 'good' plans.

Illustration

The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe is a book that many of us will be familiar with. It's the story of the defeat of the White Witch who has been holding Narnia under a spell whereby it is always winter and never Christmas. This is achieved by Aslan, who defeats the Witch's curse by dying and coming to life again. At the end, though, we read this:

"But amidst all these rejoicings Aslan himself quietly slipped away. And when the Kings and Queens noticed that he wasn't there they said nothing about it. For Mr Beaver had warned them, He'll be coming and going," he had said. "One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down - and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion."

Application

We often can't understand why things happen the way they do. It seems to us that there might be a much better way of achieving things that we know God wants. We know God wants people to come to know him, we know that God wants people to live in peace with one another. And yet we don't see that in our own lives. And we don't see it in the news. Paul, and Isaiah's, first answer to this is simply: God is God.

But we can access God's way of thinking

Be with Jesus

This makes God sound like a very distant kind of deity. It makes the world feel suddenly much colder: things happen because they happen, because in some sense, God wills it. But we have no access to the mind of God. He is just beyond us. We must just accept the consequences and get on with it.

But this is not at all Paul's meaning.

In fact, our passage in Isaiah 40 gives us a clue. The astute among you will have noticed that verse 13 in Isaiah goes a bit differently from the version that Paul quotes. Here they are side-by-side:

Isaiah:

Isa 40:13 Who can **fathom** the **Spirit** of the Lord,
or instruct the Lord as his counselor?

Paul:

Rom 12.34 'Who has **known** the **mind** of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

The key difference is in the first part: Isaiah has 'Who can **fathom** the **Spirit** of the Lord', whereas Paul has 'Who has **known** the **mind** of the Lord?'. This may not seem like a big difference, but it gives us a big hint about how we might get to know God: **God's Spirit**. For Paul, the mind of God, and Spirit of God, are one and the same.

This has some really interesting consequences for us! In Romans Paul has, before our passage, in chapter 8, gone into great length about the Spirit of God. Have a listen to this:

5 Those who live according to the flesh have their **minds set on what the flesh desires**; but those who live **in accordance with the Spirit** have their **minds set on what the Spirit desires**.

Paul says that we, Christians, have the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that Isaiah, in chapter 40, says no one can understand!

So Paul's question in verse 34 has another answer: Who has known the mind of God? Well, we do, we Christians, because we have the Spirit of God living in us. In fact, Paul says this exactly this in another passage where he quotes this same verse from Isaiah, 1 Corinthians 2:16. I'll read from verse 14:

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. **15** The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, **16** for,

‘Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?’

But we have the mind of Christ.

We have the mind of Christ.

In the renaissance artists often studied under a grand master, to learn their craft. Caravaggio was a very successful artist, with a colourful lifestyle. In his short career he managed not only to paint excellent paintings but to engender a whole school of artists who followed and developed his style, the so-called Caravaggisti. In effect, these artists were Caravaggio’s apprentices, and they could paint in his style, because they had access, in one way or another, to the ‘spirit’, if you like, of the great master.

Application

We are God’s students, his apprentices: he gives us his mind, his way of thinking through the Spirit. This gives us direct access to God’s counterintuitive way of thinking, choosing the unpromising and unlikely things of this world, to bring about his ultimate purposes.

So we are transformed as God's way of thinking becomes ours

Become like him

This is really important for understanding our Romans passage. Paul goes on, in chapter 12:

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.

Paul addresses his brothers and sisters in Christ in Rome, and by extension, us. He says, look brothers and sisters! You have the Spirit of Jesus in your lives, so go and give yourselves completely, as a sacrifice to God.

Paul is putting us in the position of Old Testament priests: it was their job to sacrifice animals as acts of worship for the people to God. But we aren't to sacrifice animals, we are giving our very selves. And we aren't dead, we are alive, because we have God's Spirit in us!

Paul goes on in verse 2:

2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Now, in preparing this sermon for this morning, I struggled a bit trying to work out what the connection was between offering ourselves as a sacrifice, and being transformed by the renewing of our minds, but then I wondered if Paul is actually presenting the same thing from two perspectives: In verse one we are offering ourselves to God because God has given us his Spirit. In verse 2, Paul puts the same thing another way: in the very act of giving ourselves to God, we

are doing exactly what the world would not do, and in so doing we are transformed because our minds are being transformed!

He is saying, by living a sacrificial life, we are doing the opposite of what the world does, and we show that we have been changed, to a completely new way of thinking.

The world is fundamentally transactional. It says: only do something if it is in your own interests. Don't do anything if it only benefits other people. Least of all do something for the benefit of God, that does nothing for you.

We see this every day in our jobs, in our careers. We are always told to think: how will this task look on my CV? Will doing this job get me a promotion?

We see it writ large in world politics at the moment.

God's way is different. We cannot transact with God, but we can respond joyfully to what he has already done for us. He sacrificed himself for us on the cross, and has given us his own Spirit, his own mind. Then, as we respond to that reality, our own minds are transformed: they become like God's!

The irony is that if we do this, we do actually get something amazing. Not only have we already had God's Spirit, but once our minds have been transformed, we see the wonder of God's purposes. As Paul puts it:

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I mentioned that renaissance artists often had followers who imitated their style, who were in some cases their students and the case of the Caravaggisti. One such Caravaggisto was a man by the name of Bartolomeo Manfredi. He never signed any of his own work, so for many years his work was mis-identified as having been done by Caravaggio himself: people looked at Manfredi's work, and saw the work of Caravaggio. Only in recent times have the two been disentangled.

Application

This is the vision of the Christian life, that our 'work', that is, our way of life, is so caught up in God, so caught up in Jesus, that people see Jesus' way of life in our own. Living like this, with the mind of God, will lead to a pattern of life that is radically different from what we see in the world around us. This will of course look very different in all of our various circumstances, but there will be some commonalities. In fact, this is exactly what Paul goes on to explain in the rest of Romans. I can't really do better than read some of that for us now:

Do as he did

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' [b] says the Lord. **20** On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Conclusion

So how are we to respond when everything around us seems to be going wrong, when injustice seems to triumph over justice, when evil seems to triumph over good? Paul's answer is this: look at the cross, look at his mercy to us, look at the Spirit he has given us, and let us give ourselves to God. And he will reward us with the mind of the Spirit, with the mind of Christ. This is by no means a complete answer, but it is a promise, that God is good, that his will is good, and that we are with God, and God is in us.