

Prayer

Lord God, we praise You for the gift of words; words by which we speak to each other, words written in books and words spoken by mobile, phone, internet and radio. Above all, we praise You for Your own Word written in Scripture, Your Word spoken to us in prayer, and Your Word revealed personally to Christian people down through the ages. Thank You for Your Word and for our words, Lord God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Paperwork

Pray today about the use of the world's resources of wood and other material for the making of paper. Pray for a responsible approach to the use of paper amongst God's people

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the work of hospitals in poor regions of the world
- Pray for women who are marginalised within society
- Pray for world leaders and the consequences of their meetings

Meditation

Some think the way ahead for God's people
Is to be even more radical than others previously;
To strip the church of all that's wrong, and ask the
Holy Spirit to do a new work untainted by the past.

For them, Jesus told
The parable of the wheat and the tares.

Some think the way ahead for God's people
Is to go back to the days of the early church;
And copy whatever may be found in Scripture,
Only to find that few will can agree what it says.

For them, Jesus told
The story of the children in the market place.

For two thousand years, the church has been faithful
To Christ's call and witness, despite persecution;
His saints have lived to show the fruit of the Spirit,
And lived in hope of the resurrection to come.

For them, Jesus said,
'Let it be done for you, according to your faith'.

Bible Study - Romans 11:13-24

¹³ I now speak to you Gentiles. In so far as I am now an apostle to the Gentiles, I honour my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow make my own people jealous, and thereby save some of them. ¹⁵ Now if their rejection brings about the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean? Nothing less than life from death!

¹⁶ Now, if the first offering to God is holy, so is the whole offering; and if the root is holy, then so are the branches. ¹⁷ And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive branch, were grafted in their place and now share the nourishment from the root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ then do not be arrogant about the branches. And if you do boast, recall that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say 'some branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' ²⁰ True; they were broken off because of unbelief, whereas you are secure only in faith.

So do not be proud, but fearful; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, it is possible he may not spare you. ²² Consider both the kindness and severity of God; severity to those who have fallen, and kindness towards you as long as you remain in His kindness; otherwise you will be cut off! ²³ However, if they do not persist in their unbelief, they will be grafted

back in; for God has the power to graft them back in again. ²⁴ Now if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and, contrary to nature, grafted back into a cultivated one; how much more would these natural branches be capable of being grafted back into their own stock!

Thought for the day

Text

Romans 11:22

²² Consider both the kindness and severity of God; severity to those who have fallen, and kindness towards you as long as you remain in His kindness

Thought

This verse is not the most popular of verses, because it speaks of both good news and bad news. It is Paul's way of saying that the Gospel is indeed the 'Good News' of God, but His kindness is only available because He is just, and acts with unrelenting opposition to all sin within humanity.

Let us not be found proclaiming a Gospel that is less than true. The love of Jesus wins our salvation, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the 'vine' must be pruned, sin must be confessed, and a battle was fought so that we might be set free. For this reason, we give no quarter to evil, we must proclaim it and live it.

Review

You would be forgiven for thinking that you have now stumbled into Paul's master class in first century horticulture, because this passage combines his deep theological thinking with an esoteric understanding of the husbandry of trees! Whatever we think of Paul's peculiar argument here, there is no doubt that his aim is to describe the miracle of God's reclaiming of the Jewish people at some time in the future.

Here, Paul addresses his readers, the largely Gentile church at Rome, and tells them his plain thoughts about the meaning of the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, and its consequences; this has been his theme throughout the past three chapters. Reaching the end of what he has to say on the subject, Paul offers a few reflections on the long term affect on the Jewish people of the Gentile acceptance of their God (11:13-15), and then likens Israel to a 'first fruits' offering to God from the people of the world. This agricultural image stays with Paul, because he proceeds to make a case for the Jewish people as being acceptable to God not just as a 'first fruits' offering, but as part of a 'tree' offering fruits even at a later date. The harvest imagery indicates that Paul has in mind the 'End Time' of final judgement when God brings in his final harvest, but Paul does not say this in so many words. He speaks of the whole harvest of God (11:16), and launches into an extraordinary description of the people of God as branches of an olive tree that are pruned and grafted to preserve fruitfulness (11:17-23), though some of his descriptions are somewhat removed from usual practices of olive tree husbandry!

There is no doubt that this passage has strong Scriptural connections with John 15, in which Jesus describes Himself as a vine (though not an olive) and His disciples as the branches. Developing the theme, He says that some branches were 'cut off' because of unfruitfulness (John 15:2,6) so that others might bear fruit (John 15:4,8), but at no stage does He mention grafting or any kind of viticulture! In fact, the traditional picture painted by scripture is that Israel is a vine, and yet here in the New Testament, Jesus says that He alone is the vine and Israel is more accurately described as a branch. Indeed, Jesus says that Israel is like an unfruitful branch that has not borne fruit and must therefore be removed from the vine.

In our passage, Paul describes Israel in very similar ways to John, but avoids the imagery of the vine, and uses the olive instead. Here, the 'first fruits' are the people of Israel who reflect the true Covenant of Love between Israel and God. Now, we cannot assume that Paul knew John 15 when writing this letter, but there is no doubt that we must read Romans 11 alongside this Gospel passage, not least because they share a message about the respective consequences of fruitfulness and unfruitfulness (11:17-22 – see also the comments in John 15 about pruning). In addition, both John's vine and Paul's olive represent Jesus (11:16).

Nevertheless, several things are clear; firstly, branches broken off the olive represent Israel that has rejected the Messiah, and secondly, the inclusion of the Gentiles into the 'People of God' is represented by the grafting of branches from different olives onto the original Jewish stock. Thirdly, the eventual re-unification of all God's people, meaning the inclusion of Israel back into God's Kingdom, is represented by the horticulturally unfeasible idea of grafting back into the tree branches previously removed. Lastly, as if to recognise this last idea as miraculous, Paul concludes, 'God has the power to graft them back again!'

This, at least by way of illustration, is the beginning of Paul's explanation of how the Old Testament people of God are reconciled again to Almighty God, at some time in His future. We will find out more tomorrow!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The Gentiles and the olive tree
- Jews and Gentiles – pride and place in the Kingdom
- Some other historical examples of ‘broken branches’

Going Deeper

Some have dismissed this passage of Scripture as being unhelpful because the horticulture described is fanciful; but why should it be normal or usual? Paul was using an illustration to try and describe the impossible; yet this was what he deeply believed, and it was the best he could do! We will now look at some of the interesting details and comments Paul makes in the course of this fascinating passage of Scripture.

The Gentiles and the olive tree

Although it is the final line of this passage which draws our attention because it is both impossible, and also refers back to Paul’s main concern about the future of the Jewish people, he begins by addressing the Gentiles. His words in verse 14 and 15 reflect the decision he took after the Council at Jerusalem, when the Church formally accepted the place of uncircumcised Gentiles as members of God’s people. He consequently ceased attending the synagogues of towns he evangelised and went straight to the people (e.g. Acts 16:1-15). It appears that part of his thinking was to evangelise the Gentiles directly, and not as he had previously done with Barnabas, via the Jewish communities of towns visited. Here in Romans, he says that it was also his intention to make the Jewish people jealous by taking the name of God directly to pagan people without reference to them. We may doubt whether this was a helpful approach, but there is no mistaking Paul’s express intent!

Paul’s example then begins to unfold, with specific reference to the Gentiles. The ‘first fruits’ of the tree have been offered and accepted as holy, so the tree is holy (11:16) and so are the branches. This is Paul’s way of saying that the heritage of God’s people is sound, despite the problems. The following verse clearly develops the idea that whilst some of the original people of God have proved to be unfruitful branches that have been broken off (11:17), and talks of the Gentiles as ‘wild stock’ grafted onto the original tree, taking advantage of the sap and nourishment of the tree. This itself is a little strange. Normally, a strong wild root has a cultivated ‘scion’ grafted into it so that the strength of the wild stock enables the fruitful cultivar (cultivated stock) to grow. Here, however, the opposite is said to happen; the cultivar has a wild scion attached! There has been much debate over the centuries about this, and some claim to have proof that this practice was indeed performed in Jesus’ day as a means of trying to breathe new life into an old cultivar of olive. It remains debatable, and perhaps a tempting invitation to anyone who has an olive tree with which to experiment!

Jews and Gentiles - pride and place in the Kingdom

Nevertheless, the horticulture is not the point; it is only a prop for what Paul wants to say, in this case, to the Gentiles. Principally, he calls upon the Gentiles not to boast that they have any superior place in the tree of God’s Kingdom just because some branches have been removed to make space for them (11:17); the heart of the message comes now, ‘recall that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.’ (11:18). This is a sobering message which we should listen to with care, and to this day, it behoves Christians to honour the Jewish people for bearing the message of God, despite the fact that they have rebelled against their Messiah.

In the following three verses (11:19,20,21), Paul directly addresses the potential attitudes of Gentile Christians who might say that their position in the Kingdom of God is more honoured than the Jewish people. Paul reminds his readers of the reasons for the removal of the old branches and strongly suggests that the old sin of unbelief which affected the Jewish people was still possible amongst God’s new people, the Church. Unbelief, he said, remained a criterion for removal from the tree. This is true even now, for unbelief is the reason why people are not part of the Kingdom of God today, whatever part they claim in the life of the Church. This is a deeply challenging message, for we too, must live in fear of Almighty God (11:20), for He is the Judge of all things and the arbiter of what branches are a part of His tree and what are not. At this point, the parallels with John 15 are strong, for the most difficult part of John 15 remains the fact that it speaks of God’s willingness to ‘prune’ his vine in order to make it fruitful.

People find it hard today to think that God might ‘prune’ branches through Jesus, or remove them as in our passage today (11:21). But Paul is unrelenting in his pursuit of his point; indeed far more so than at any other in this whole passage. God is the awesome Judge of all who is supremely kind to those who believe in Him, but will not tolerate unbelief in Christ because it is in opposition to the work of His Kingdom. The message of verse 21 is therefore pertinent to us today; ‘if God did not spare the natural branches, it is

possible that he may not spare you'. These are no words of comfort, they are words of the highest truthfulness and challenge.

Some other historical examples of 'broken branches'

It is indeed part of the history of the church that some of the early churches which did not persist in a rigorous faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, disappeared in the early centuries AD. When Islam swept across North Africa in the early seventh Century AD, many churches were weak in faith and disappeared without trace, for example. In our own day, churches are regularly being founded by individuals who have a particular charisma and leadership quality, but too many of them disappear from the Christian 'map' of this or that town or city when either scandal or dissention breaks out, or an individually gifted leader decides for personal reasons to move on. This is not the faithful and long lasting evidence of the Kingdom of God, but the evidence of people who claim Christian faith but are actually dependent upon people and circumstances, for example, rather than Christ.

We must now accept that at the end of our passage, Paul's mind was not on the horticulture, but on the purposes of God. He said that if it was possible for God to continue to work in judgement within the Gentile church and remove unfaithful branches, then He would certainly 'graft back in' those Jews who came to meet the criterion of faith in the Messiah. The horticultural miracle of 'grafting back' is just that; a miracle; and by the end of the passage, Paul was using the illustration with considerable liberality, but his point is clear enough.

Having issued a stern message to the Gentile church to be respectful of the Jews, Paul indicated that God would always deal graciously with His own people if they expressed faith in His Messiah. The last part of Romans 11, which we will read tomorrow, will complete what he has to say about how and when this will happen.

Application

I have had cause recently to look around some web-sites on the internet advertising various Christian events, churches or organisations. I find it surprising that few of them mention much that directly relates to God, the Bible, Jesus Christ or the Church. It seems as if a policy decision has been made by Christian organisations to avoid making such connections on the front page, because this will be a big 'put off' to any who might be drawn into the web site. I have read one church website which on its front page said little more than 'we are the parish of ... and we like community; we like fun and doing things in a wacky way with all ages. Come and join us for a new expression of being community in ...'. I also came across another website advertising a well known Christian conference, which advertised the wonderful personal achievements of the booked American speaker so strongly, an outsider might wonder whether the great man claimed to be the Messiah himself!

I am afraid I conclude that some of our leaders are so insecure in their faith that they are not able to present Christ to the world; they present themselves. Moreover, all Scripture cries out with a loud voice that whatever the generation or time, our role as branches on the tree is to be fruitful for the tree and for the Lord who made us together with the whole world. What we do must honour Him and advertise Him, through good or bad worldly circumstances; we do not advertise ourselves, we promote Christ, whatever the misconceptions..

The Christian church today is fragmenting fast as people lose faith in the structures of the church that have sustained Christian witness for centuries. This is undoubtedly true, and possibly a right response to what has happened in the centralised power structures of many churches. However, amongst the proliferation of new churches and 'expressions of church' that have arisen, we have yet to see a powerful, believable and consistent presentation of the Gospel to the world, of Christ and Christ alone. We look for the start of real revival; but as yet we remain under judgement of our Father, just as Paul indicates in this passage.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you think that Paul was right to imagine that the success of his own ministry would make the Jewish people jealous? Was this hope right or wrong?
2. Do you know of any examples of branches that have been 'cut off' the Church, by the Lord.
3. How is unbelief manifest within the church today? What can we do about this, and how can Jesus Christ be made real to people today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Here is yet another example of Scripture reminding us that our task as Christian disciples is to give testimony to our Lord Jesus Christ; for being a part of something that is alive and growing is purposeful, and we should be proactive within it rather than merely reactive to it. It is possible that this part of Paul's letter was known by John when he wrote his Gospel, but John wrote about a vine not an olive in order to identify Jesus with the Jewish people as a whole. However, no one can never prove such connections!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider reading through this passage of Scripture and think about how you feed from the tree to which you are grafted (Christ) and what fruit you bear (in your life). Also, what do you think you are growing into as part of the tree?*
- *Pray for the people of Israel, and pray about the hope of their re-unification with the church of God in His good time.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father; may all Your people so work together to proclaim Your name, that the whole world will come to know that Jesus Christ is the centre of our faith. May we be consistent in our witness and unyielding in our faith, and may we serve Your Kingdom for ever; AMEN
