

Dora Koop, July 20, 2014

“The letter to the Romans”

Roman 14:1-12 and Roman 15:1-7

Last week John spoke about taking holidays and maybe going somewhere to escape what we are doing here or just doing something different. I had the opportunity to do just this in June, just over a month ago. The son of a friend of mine was getting married in a little village called Tuscania in Italy and so I took the opportunity to spend a few days in Rome before the wedding. Then when the topics for meditations came along and one was Rome – I thought it would give me the opportunity to share some of my impressions and what I had learnt while visiting Rome and it would also give me the opportunity to learn more as I prepared about the history of Rome and sites I had seen.

So today I will touch on both modern day Rome and then look at the context for the letter that Paul writes to the Romans.

I have been to Rome several times and each time I have seen the City through different lenses. I have been on a tour (a bit like John's message last week where we stopped off at different sites), with work, with my family and there are some highlights and of course this was a special trip and finally this time with a friend.

As mentioned in the children's story in June I stayed in a convent while in Rome. A friend had recommended that we stay here since this is where he stays and he always feels welcomed. The convent, Santa Brigida is dedicated to St Bridget of Sweden and the Swedish national church in Rome. The church is part of the convent of the Bridgettine Sisters and the building we stayed in comes from around the 13th century.

While at the convent we had the opportunity to visit the rooms of St Bridget and her daughter St Catherine, the first abbess of the Bridgettine Sisters. The rooms contain relics of the two saints, and are decorated with paintings from the lives of the saints. Chapels of St Bridget and St Catherine have been installed in their respective rooms

One other person who is tied to the story is Mary Elizabeth M. Hesselblad who was born in 1870 and died in Rome in 1957. She reestablished the old order brigidino and this year was the 100th anniversary of this reestablishment of the order. One other interesting piece I found when doing research on the order was a newspaper article that indicated that the mother superior of the convent, a Mother Tekla, was the The Most Powerful Woman in Rome. And if the article is to be believed she had a lot of influence over high Catholic officials and even prior Popes.

In fact we did see some evidence of this. While still planning the trip, the mother of the groom wrote and asked if I wanted to have an audience with the Pope. There was a small charge

attached to this but I thought this would be something I had not done before and given the reception Pope Francis has been getting I thought it would be a once in a life time experience. When one of the nuns in the convent found out we were going we received special passes to get closer to the pope. Now, I did find out that this audience with the Pope was not all that intimate...on the day in question there were around 10,000 people in St. Peter's Square.

So for me ... all these centuries after Paul wrote to the Roman I very much saw a Christian presence in Rome. Even if all the people who came out to see the Pope were doing so because he is a powerful person with political and economic power and not because he is a spiritual leader to them – it still shows a strong Christian presence or influence there. Just as an aside I must admit I was a bit taken back by the “rock star” quality of the audience waiting for the Pope. Before speaking, he drove around in his Pope mobile and people flocked to get a picture or to be touched by him. I had assumed there would be more of a “spiritual aura” when seeing him and maybe I missed this as for me he could have been any well-known political figure and the audience just wanted to say they had been there.

Another part of Rome, that for me forms a transition from the present to the past are the historic sites such as the Colosseum, the forum and the Catacombs. When I went to the Colosseum with my family – the images of the Christians that were kept in the rooms in the lower floors came to mind. Now in fact there is some doubt that the Christians were ever fed to the Lions here. In any event because the Colosseum has been so well preserved it is easy to imagine what it must have been like all those years ago in Rome with 50,000 spectators watching the Gladiators fight and other entertainment that took place there. The building of the Colosseum took place in the same time period that Paul was writing his letter to the Romans so as you sit in the seats you just have to shut your eyes and imagine the scene all those centuries ago. The people there would have been neighbors of the early Christians and people they would have encountered in their everyday lives.

On one of my first trips to Rome I visited the Catacombs – at a time when the bodies were still kept in them I might add. They have now been removed. There were Jewish catacombs and Christian catacombs – evidence again of the early Christian church who preferred to be buried rather than cremated as was the custom of the Romans.

So for me ... when I was working on the meditation, because of the visiting I have done in and around Rome, I felt like I could imagine a little bit what it would have been like for the Christians, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, during the period that Paul wrote.

So let's put the passages that were read into more of a historical context.

The church in Rome was likely founded by the visitors from Rome who had been present at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Most of the Roman believers in the early years are Jews. In AD 49,

however, Emperor Claudius expels all the Jews from Rome following Jewish riots there. This leaves only the Gentile Christians, who do not share the (formerly majority) Jewish Christian concerns about foods, circumcision, and Jewish holy days. - (as an aside - It is interesting to note that Jews in Rome were allowed to keep their holidays and operate under Jewish law). Also, the Gentile Christians have no way of knowing when—or if—the Jewish Christians will ever return to Rome. Leaving aside ritual concerns that they do not share doesn't seem like a bad thing for the Gentile Christians to do. During the five years until Nero becomes emperor and allows the Jews' return, many changes occur in the Roman church. The Jewish believers are aghast at what they find when they return.

I think we can all imagine what this must have been like. On a fairly minor scale how many of us have left home for school or even for a summer and when we return our bedroom or the family room has been changed or the family has started doing something differently than before. Did you feel a bit put out ...or upset because your way of doing things had not been considered.

On a larger scale I encountered this transitioning back several years ago at McGill. I am sure you remember two years ago the clerical staff were on strike for 4 months at McGill. (you may not remember the strike but this was just before the student's strike which most people remember). During that time we, as managers, had to learn to do things differently and some things more efficiently. When the staff returned some found that the work they were doing had changed. It was a time of adjustment and there was mistrust for a long period of time. Special sessions were held to try and address the concerns on both sides and it wasn't an easy time as not only were there new processes but new relationships had formed as well.

Let's put ourselves in the position of the Gentile Christians who remained in Rome. With the departure of the Jews they might have felt some freedoms. They could live out their faith without being questioned about what they were eating or not eating, and which holidays they celebrated. It must have been liberating for them and as time went on they became more comfortable with their way of worshiping. Friendships would have developed and probably business relationships as well. The nature of the whole community would have changed.

Now back come some of the Jews that had left. There may have been some initial happiness at seeing old friends but eventually customs and practices came into conflict.

The Romans text addresses this situation. Paul tells the Romans to start with the premise that other believers who hold opposing views do so because they are convinced that they are honoring God.

Paul also gives some very practical guidance to the people in the church.

1. Give a welcome to anyone whose faith is not strong and don't get into arguments about doubtful points.
2. Consider your neighbor's good so that you can support each other. This reminds me of a form of looking at problems called Appreciative Inquiry which many of you are probably familiar with as we used part of the process early to work on our MFM conflict. But just as a reminder, because I think it is a powerful way to attack issues -

*Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the **best** in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.*

It can also be used when solving a complex issue and in fact MCC used the process when they recently went through their restructuring process. I believe it is powerful because the process makes the participants consider the good of each other – and then as Paul says we should use this good to support each other.

3. Don't judge one another. I think we are all familiar with this adage or when Jesus said ...he who is without sin cast the first stone. Or the old idiom “don't be like the pot calling the kettle black.”

This comes from old times when pots and pans were generally black and kettles were generally metallic and reflective. Therefore the pot sees its black reflection in the kettle and thinks that the kettle is black.

I don't believe that Paul is saying we should never question each other but to be careful about what we consider sin and also to look carefully at our own actions and lives before judging others. In the end we will all be judged, but not by man but by God.

4. Accept one another as Christ accepted you. WHY – in order to bring praise to God. All of these instructions are not about making us look better...or making it easier for us but – to build the church or to praise God. In other words – ‘We’, or more specifically ‘I’ do not come first ... “others” do.

5. Make decisions so that God may be honored through your actions. And each person *will* be accountable to God in the end. What Paul does want is for the Roman church to be united in its goal of glorifying God (Romans 15:6).

It is worthwhile repeating that Paul tells the Romans to start with the premise that other believers who hold opposing views do so because they are convinced that they are honoring God.

The question for us is ...How can adopting this premise (that people who disagree with us are seeking God's honor in their actions) change how we enter into discernment in our churches?

I want to briefly go back to the beginning of my meditation. As I mentioned, I stayed at a convent and found the nuns very gracious and the place itself a retreat from the noise and busyness of the City. Then on the last morning when we were taken to the room of St. Bridget, we were told that they were hoping that Elizabeth who had reinvigorated the order, might also become a saint and they were praying that she would. She had performed a miracle when alive and since her death another miracle, a healing, had been performed in her name. At this point I realized I wasn't comfortable as I believe healing can occur through all of us who pray and who knows if it was because the person was praying through Elizabeth that the healing occurred. It dawned on me when doing the meditation that if I would have continued in my relationship with the nuns or worked together I would have had to think about how I related to them. I do believe they were convinced that they were honoring God in all they did and said and yet this aspect of sainthood for me was not something I believed in at all.

So what do we have in common with other Christians and what can we focus on...This came across my desk this week and I thought it was appropriate when addressing diversity in our Christian communities.

1. We would say the name "Jesus." We might mean different things by that name, but he is the center, the reason we exist.
2. Allowing ample room for our diversity, we would say what we mean by faith in God. Not how right we are and how wrong others are, but an I-message: Here's why I believe in God.
3. We would tell stories about God's impact on our lives. Not grand doctrines, not airtight theories, not definitions of who's inside the circle and who's outside, but stories of personal encounter.
4. We would listen to other stories, respectfully, not defensively, eager to hear what our fellow Christian has to say.
5. We would each tell as honestly as we can how we are trying to lead our lives in the light of our encounters and stories. We would sketch the bridge between faith and action.
6. We would tell what we see in the world — not in the woe-is-me, sky-is-falling, Satan-is-winning manner people expect from us, but just what we see and how we think God cares about it.
7. We would speak of hope, a durable, solid-rock hope that God is God, and God can use us to make a difference.
8. We would talk of joy. Not giddiness, not even happiness, as the world understands happiness, but that deeper response to God that feels whole and peaceful.

Let us, as we go about our daily lives this week, think about what we can see that is similar in others and how we can keep the name of Jesus at the center of our lives.