

The book of Romans was Saul of Tarsus' magnum opus, the summary of the spiritual and theological conclusions he had reached since his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, probably about 40a.d . The date of Romans itself may have been about 58. Saul's years of ministry had been an arduous struggle. He never did become a Christian but remained a Jew who believed in Messiah Jesus.

Saul was a third generation Roman citizen, a member of a whole extended family that was part of a politically and financially elite stratum. In society, and he himself was probably intellectually gifted. When it became time for his formal education to begin, he might have chosen to study with any master in the Roman Empire except for one problem he was a devout Jew. He would study no gentile philosophy or medicine or mathematics. He would go to study Jewish law in Jerusalem, possibly with Gamael. Saul loved the law. It was what kept the Jewish people together, kept them Jewish. Without the law Judaism would have long since disappeared . But it lived thanks to all those synagogues in all those towns and cities of the Roman Empire and beyond, from Babylon to France.

That is where the law was taught every Sabbath and lived every day. Judaism is alive around the world today thanks to the law and the peoples' devotion to it. The temple in Jerusalem has been a heap of ruins since 70 A., 1137 years but the law lives on. Most of us do not realize that it was not until the middle of the 19th century, about the time of Charles Darwin, that Judaism came to be seen as a race in the biological sense. It was another Englishman, not Darwin, who purported the erroneous idea. It migrated to Germany and eventually became the basis for the holocaust which cost 6,000,000 people their lives. Until about 1850, Judaism was just a religious label and body of practices like any other religion.

Back to Saul of Tarsus, he was bright, an able lawyer, devoted to the law and tough on crime. He was probably professionally as well as religiously ambitious. I see him in the mold of Rudy Giuliani or Bobby Kennedy. One bright morning Saul began his war on crime by collecting his warrants and other. Paperwork from the high priest's office putting it all in his brief case getting into his limo and heading for Damascus. This heretical group "the people of the way". They still worshiped this guy Jesus as a Messiah even though he had been killed by the Romans. They should have known he was a fake, he was a healer that's what he did for a living but he did it on the Sabbath too a clear violation of the law. By the name of J. Edgar Hoover, Saul would find these rats where ever they were hiding and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial, but it never happened.

The Saul who started for Damascus that day never got there. Somewhere along the freeway in the backseat of the limo, he had a supernatural encounter with the living Christ . As a result he was in some kind of shock when he got to Damascus, weakened and probably in the very hands of the man he had come to arrest, the local leader of "the people of the way".

Meanwhile back in Jerusalem, time was passing the high priest began to notice the lack of communication from Saul of Tarsus. Then one morning a thunderclap hit. A message came in that Saul had defected. He had gone over to the other side. He was publicly proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

The high priest without knowing it fast forwarded into the future over two thousand years to the day that Kim Philby defected to the Soviet Union. This comparison is more than an allegory. The 9 th chapter of Aacts tells us that in Damascus a plot was hatched to kill Saul. He had to be smuggled out of the city and back to Jerusalem, then back to Caesarea then back to Tarsus. In the Philby case, the Soviets feared that the west might try to murder Philby so it was a long time before they would allow a western journalist to come and interview him. The more things change the more they stay the same.

Romans was probably written about 15 years after Saul's conversion. In today's lesson part of a lingering love/hate relationship between him and the law, or is there something else here something deeper? Whatever Saul's emotional state may have been, the effect of his words were profound for the future.

At the time Saul wrote, Christianity was still in the womb of Judaism so to speak, just an heretical sect called "the people of the way." It would become a different but similar religion, worshipping the same God, but built upon faith rather than the keeping of specific laws because the law was not an end in itself. It did not make good. It was given to man by God for our benefit not just a requirement 'to obey to stroke God's ego. Faith helps us to live as Jesus lived, as God's children.

I agree that Saul's writing in Romans is heavy and hard to plow through. But not all that he wrote was of that nature. In fact his letter to the church in Corinth is different from Romans. Perhaps it is even more important than Romans alone because together they give us a much fuller picture.

In our lesson from Romans Saul has told us that the law can tell us right from wrong but it can not give us the power to do the right. No matter how hard he tries, Saul ends up sinning. What is this sin that he can not overcome, that so easily

besets him? Is he just a dirty old man with too much free testosterone in his blood stream?

Perhaps we can find an answer in his letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a wild and crazy city, a mixture of sin city Las Vegas, and the bazaar ambiance of San Francisco in the days of the beatniks and the hippies. Whatever you sought you could find in Corinth, economically, ethnically, morally or immorally, sexually even religiously. What ever happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth, even if not very clearly in the memory of the one who did it.

The church was somewhat of a reflection of the spirit of the city. "the extraordinary was routine. The liturgy was more of a "happening", speaking in tongues, interpretations, prophecy, miraculous healings, the explanation of mysteries lavish financial gifts, even willingness to undergo martyrdom, and all of this was just at the Rite I 8o'clock service.

The problem was that the Corinthians believed that all this manic religious enthusiasm was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Saul told them no. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of love that is more concerned with the needs of others than with one's self, a self-giving love, patient and kind, not puffed up or seeking glory for itself. Unless love motivated all these religious hand stands, they are nothing but a loud gong a clanging symbol, a big noise calling attention to one's self, they are expressions of one's self centeredness the core of all sin. This was the sin that the devil tried to use with Jesus in the wilderness ..."if you are the Son of God prove it by turning stones to bread or jumping off the roof of the temple and landing unhurt." Saul had to remind the Corinthians that he could speak in tongues more than all of them.

Saul had begun his life's work as an avid young prosecutor zealots for the law, tough on crime who would be compared 2000 years later with Robert Kennedy and Rudy Juliani. Here was the kind of man who's desire for glory might be his beseting sin.

Zeal for righteousness is the perfect camouflage behind which the root of all sin, self centeredness, can easily hide. All of us good Christians zealous for righteousness should not let it easily beset us.

The Collect for the Day (Proper 9)

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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