

A few Sundays ago, Jim Klopstock preached a sermon in which he said that there was an emperor or two who had evicted the Jews from Rome because of some conflict or other among them. I don't know the details but today's lesson from romans is about the issue of Conflict among them. They were a mixture of "people of the way", gentile converts, and gentile proselytes.

The conflict in this case seems to have been about two things, the proper day for Sabbath observance, and obedience to the Jewish food laws. Saul did not support either side of these issues, but he scolded both sides for their lack of respect and sensitivity to each other. He had expected better. But their bickering may have had a deeper cause than selfish egotism about being "right"

For thousands of years our ancient ancestors feared natural disasters and the forces that caused them, flood, drought, volcanoes, earthquakes all kind of unexpected misfortunes. They gave these forces names, called them gods, gave them names and developed beliefs about their likes and dislikes in order to gain their good will or, at least avoid offending the, one warm oct. Evening about six years ago I was watching tv. My dog Louie was in the back yard, my sliding glass door was open. There had been small flickers of lightening and grumbles of thunder. suddenly there was a flash and a blast that sounded like artillery was being fired in the neighbor's back yard. Louie shot through the door as if he was the projectile from the gun hid in the farthest corner of the back-bed room. I was amused, Louie was terrified.

I imagined him as the soul of my ancient great grandfather 10/502. Well at least we know that the recent hurricanes in the south east were not due to God's wrath on the bible belt God's only connection with those events will be through love compassion and support the rest of the nation gives. The victims. But in Saul of Tarsus day many of the Jews in the Roman church may have truly afraid of God's wrath. The concern about the law may have been truly genuine.

Incidentally Saul seems to have felt good about his financial self-support what we call his tent making ministry. When Rabbi Steven Vale was renting our parish hall for a time he told me that it was technically wrong for a rabbi to be paid for teaching Torah.

In Acts 8 we have an account of a magician named Magnus attempting to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John. They cursed him for his despicable attempt.

With the power of science as we have seen it grow since the industrial revolution, God's power, divine power is still seen as the ultimate, the worker of miracles and a great resource for one who access to it. In the 1980s this produced a phenomenon called "the electronic church" some entrepreneurs purchased some television time to broadcast religious programs from which they derived as they had hoped, still more money. As their notoriety grew in my opinion they brought ridicule upon the gospel of Christ. A secular song writer named Ray Stevens wrote a comical song about these people (doubtlessly at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) that brought them to judgement i.e. showed them to themselves as other people saw them. The song raised these questions: would he wear a pinky ring? Would he drive a fancy car? Would his wife wear furs and diamonds? Would his dressing room have a star? If he came back tomorrow can you tell me I'd like to know, would Jesus wear a Rolex on his television show?

Would Jesus be political if he came back to earth? Have his second home in Palm Springs, try to hide his worth? Take money from the poor folks if he came back again, and admit he'd talked to all those preachers who say they've been talking to him? An electronic 20th century version of Simon who tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John.

On a more positive note, I believe that Saul of Tarsus would have been generally pleased at something that is taking place in the Episcopal Church here in Northern California. I'm sure most of you are aware of the feeding program for the homeless that has been in effect through Epiphany Church in Vacaville for some time. Feeding the hungry is part of the beauty of the program but there is more) Over time a variety of other faith groups have become regularly involved. They provide, prepare and serve the food on a regular basis, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Father's House, LDS. etc. Every Sunday each faith group returns to its regular church and worships according to its own liturgy and specific doctrines. But come mid-week they come to Epiphany's parish hall and unite in true evangelism.

I have long been interested in and concerned about church growth. At first, I thought in terms of the Episcopal Church. We need more Episcopalians, we really do. They are more than welcome. The magic answer seemed to be the discovery of how to get people to do what we want them to do, i.e., come to the Episcopal Church.

But I have come to see the issue from a slightly different perspective. Because God is too great for any faith group to fully comprehend him, to have exclusive possession of the whole truth about him, it would be better for various churches to accept Saul of Tarsus suggestion and live in harmony about their minor differences and unite and act in compassion and love for those in need. This is what we are seeing with Epiphany's feeding program. It is growing into a form of church growth in that it is incarnate love. That is what it means for our support of needy children at Fairview School and our second offering program that donates to humanitarian needs. That is what it means for us to be the Body of Christ in the world it means to give to others in need, not to get them to do what we want them to do for us.

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