**In Christ Sandwich 4.6.23**

 **Ist reading:** 1 Cor. 12 v 12 – 27;

**Intro to 2nd reading:**

I had been reading through Romans in my Quiet times and when I got to the greetings at the end, I was tempted to skip them. However, I’m glad I didn’t. As you listen to this passage, or follow it in your bible, I invite you to picture these people and really hear what Paul says about them. And notice how often the phrase ‘in the Lord’ occurs.

**2nd reading:** Romans 16 v 1 – 16, 21 – 24

*Visual aid: A paper chain of people*

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This represents the people Paul mentions at the end of his letters. There are actually many more than this and they are only a part of the early church.

They weren’t of course identical in shape, size and ethnicity, any more than we are. They were men and women, young and old from all over the Roman world. Some of the names suggest they were servants or slaves. They had different personalities, abilities and gifts but, just as the paper people are joined, they were joined – heart to heart rather than hand to hand – because they were all in Christ. This doesn’t mean they all thought exactly the same or always got on – far from it, but they were one in Christ; each one a part of His body on earth and equally important, valuable and loved by Him.

The ends are not joined – they are not a closed circle of friends, but open and hopeful for other people to become part of them in their love of Christ.

**Sermon Intro.**

So, let’s consider some of these – our brothers and sisters from the early days of the church and see what they can teach us.

Some people think that Paul was against women, but there are several women in this list. Let’s hear what he says about Phoebe:

**Phoebe** came from the church in the port of Cenchrea, about 5 – 6 miles from Corinth and it is thought she carried this letter of Paul to the church in Rome. As well as introducing her and commending her to the Christians in Rome, these greetings will have helped her know who to contact when she arrived. Her name, Phoebe, means ‘pure, radiant as the moon’; the moon doesn’t have its own light, but reflects the light of the sun and, certainly, Phoebe reflected the light of Christ. Paul describes her as a servant of the church in Cenchrea. The Greek ‘diakonos’ can mean ‘a servant’ or it might refer to a church official or deacon or a patron. Whichever applies to Phoebe she obviously had a servant-heart because Paul says she has been a great help of Paul and many others.

Some people have a servant-heart. People who are constantly aware and eager to help in whatever way they can. They are male and female ‘Phoebes’ and they shine for the Lord, but not in a showy, ‘look-at-me’ way. They reflect the light of Christ as they just quietly get on with it.

Then there are those of us who aren’t so good at spotting needs and sometimes find it hard to galvanise ourselves into action – especially in aid of the ungrateful or those who take advantage. We are the ones who must pray for grace to wash feet as Jesus commanded.

The church in Rome is asked to ‘Receive her in a manner worthy of the saints and help her in any way she needs.’ It looks as though she may have had personal business to deal with in Rome. It seems unlikely that Paul would have asked a woman to make the long sea journey from Cenchrea to Rome just to take his letter. It seems more likely that she was travelling anyway and offered to take a letter. I don’t know, but I wonder whether she was a businesswoman like Lydia the seller of purple cloth from Thyatyra, in which case she might well have helped to support Paul and others, financially, and might well have travelled for business.

Having introduced Phoebe, Paul moves on to greet members of the church in Rome.

**Priscilla (or Prisca) and Aquilla.** Acts 18 v 2 and cross refs to v 5 in ESV

Here we have what seems to be a husband-and-wife team who host a church in their home in Rome and presumably lead it. We learn from Acts 18 that they had previously been living in Rome, but were forced to leave when the Emperor, Claudius, expelled all Jews from the city. So, they moved to Corinth where they worked as tentmakers. This was also Paul’s trade, so he stayed and worked with them while he was on his mission to that city. Eventually (after a certain amount of trouble related to preaching the gospel) Paul travelled with Aquilla and Priscilla to Ephesus in Syria, where they remained, being used by the Lord in that city. They get a mention at the end of 1 Corinthians, and it seems they were hosting a church in Syria at that time and sent greetings back to the Corinthian Christians. Intriguingly, Paul says that they risked their own necks for him, but, infuriatingly, doesn’t give any details! I suppose it must have been during the opposition in Corinth when they were first there. And now they are back in Rome.

Wherever they found themselves they seem to have made an impact on the inhabitants of that place. As they partnered with Paul in preaching about Jesus and people accepted Him as Lord, they opened their home for the new church to meet.

**Andronicus and Junia / Julia** Probably another husband and wife team who came to the Lord before Paul’s conversion and are ‘well-known among the apostles’. This phrase might mean that they were considered to be apostles in the wider sense of messengers of the gospel, or just that they were really quite famous in the church. They had apparently been imprisoned for their faith.

**Tryphena, Tryphosa (**I wonder if they were twins?) **and Persis.**  Here are three women who are ‘workers’ for the Lord. Like Phoebe, they are serving the church because they first became servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I thought about these three, I remembered two other church ladies who are mentioned in Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi

**Euodia and Syntiche** (Philip. 4 v 2, 3) Paul wrote:

“I implore Euodia, and I implore Syntiche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, to help these women, with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.”

Oh dear, what has happened here? These ladies, who had worked with Paul and others to spread the good news of salvation, have had such a sharp disagreement that news of it has reached Paul! Paul addresses them separately, not taking sides and implicitly acknowledging that at present they are not Euodia-and-Syntiche united in their love of the Lord. He urges others to help them make it up and to be of the same mind *in the Lord.* This is not an issue of apostasy, or Paul would have addressed it. It is hoped that by talking it over with a third party, they will have seen where one or both was mistaken or that they could agree to disagree and still love one another, in the Lord.

**Rufus and his mother and mine** I suppose it’s possible that Paul and Rufus were physical brothers, but I think it’s more likely that Rufus’s Mother was a Mother-in-the-Lord to Paul at some stage. What a blessing it is to have Mothers and Fathers in the Lord; those mature Christians who take us under their wing and nurture us, supporting and encouraging us as we grow in the faith, making mistakes and sometimes struggling. I had two such Mothers-in-the-Lord who gave me their time and listened and prayed with me and for me. One was ten years older than me, but the other was my age. There doesn’t have to be seniority of age, but maturity in the Lord.

What a blessing it is to be given the opportunity to be a Mother or Father-in-the-Lord, to someone not so far on in the faith; to nurture and encourage them and pray for them.

It is not certain but possible that Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene, who was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus on the way to Calvary when Jesus was physically too weak to continue. The fact that Mark mentions Simon’s two sons in his account suggests that they were known in the early church. Again, one feels that there is a whole story here about Simon and his wife and sons which we don’t know.

**Others**

I have picked out a few of the church in Rome, but Paul sends greetings to lots of other people.

And others join him in sending greetings: Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater and Tertius who wrote the letter at Paul’s dictation. If you have a Bible with marginal cross-references, you might like to look them up. What I want us to remember is that all these people were ‘in Christ’ and ‘laboured in Christ’ and were ‘beloved in the Lord.’

They were all different and had different gifts and abilities. Some were higher profile than others, some had suffered more than others; some were high status and rich, others were low-status, even slaves. But they were all ‘in the Lord’ part of His Body and all were valuable and beloved.

**What does it mean to be in Christ?**

John 3 v 3, 6 (TPT) Jesus said to a Jewish religious leader:

“Before a person can even perceive God’s kingdom, they must first experience a rebirth … You must all be born from above.” He was speaking of being born again by the Holy Spirit. That’s the start.

Eph. 3 v 17 (TPT) “Then by constantly using your faith, the life of Christ will be released deep inside you, and the resting place of His love will become the very source and root of your life.”

**Please listen to this, it is important to grasp**

2 Corinthians 5 v 17 (NKJ) “...if anyone is **in Christ,** he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold all things have become new.” TPT puts it: ‘All that is related to the old order has vanished.’

You see, when we are in Christ, we are under new management; we are no longer masters of our own lives, but we are under Christ’s Lordship. Which is a great place to be because He has a much safer pair of hands, than ours, and is much wiser.

Gal. 6 v 15 (TPT) Paul writes: “May my only boast be found in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him I have been crucified to this natural realm; and the natural realm is dead to me and *no longer dominates my life.*.. what really matters is the transforming power of this new creation life.”

**When Jesus died on that cross, He not only took my acts of sin into His own body, but He, who was clean and sinless, took my sinfulness. He who was completely without any stain of sin, took your sinfulness and paid the penalty. He who was without sin became sin for us.**

**2 Cor. 5 v21 (NKJ)**

**“He (Father God) made Him (the Son) who knew no sin to *be* sin for us, that we might *become* the righteousness of God in Him.”**

Mind-blowing! Thank You, Lord!

In Romans 6 Paul explains that now we are no longer under the dominion of sin – we are no longer mastered by that sinfulness because that is dead, and we have new life under the Lordship of Christ. All that being unable to resist temptation is gone, we are new people – a new sort of person – people who are alive in our spirits to God the Lord. Yes, we will sometimes sin, but sin does not define us. When we sin, we repent and receive forgiveness. That is the life lived under grace.

Romans 8 v 15 - 16 (TPT) Paul: “…you did not receive the ‘spirit of religious duty’ leading you back into the fear of never being good enough. But you have received the ‘Spirit of full acceptance’ enfolding you into the family of God.”

You see, we never were good enough. We have been saved by His grace and we live by it.

There are two dangers: we can become complacent about sin and, by indulging in it, bring ourselves back into slavery to it; or, like the Galatian church, we can start to try to earn God’s favour, even our salvation, by trying to be good enough – keeping rules, religious observance and so on, forgetting that we can’t do it, we are totally dependent on His grace.

*Another chain of paper people –*

So, this represents you good folk – the church of Christ meeting at URC InSandwich plus all those other brothers and sisters in Christ in Sandwich. And, beyond, to all who are in Christ. And again, the chain is open-ended for others to hear about Christ and want to be part of His family.

1. So, may we have grace:

1. To serve like Phoebe
2. To work for Christ, wherever we live.
3. To be mothers and Fathers-in-Christ as we have opportunity.
4. To settle any differences quickly and be one in Christ.

2. May we remember that while we are valued individuals, we are part of a whole in Christ.

3. May we know the reality that, if we are in Christ, the domination of our old life of sinfulness is gone because Jesus became that sinfulness so that we can become His righteousness.

4. We are under new management as we live to serve the King of Kings, together. Amen