Isaiah 6.1-8

Romans 8.12-17

22 May 2016

Spirit and Life

Imagine with me a time and place very different from our own and yet with striking parallels to our lives. Imagine sitting beside Paul near the mid-50’s of the first century in Corinth as he writes what we know as the Letter to the Romans.

First, see the context. Rome was the greatest power the western world had known. It ruled the Mediterranean region longer than any other empire before or since then. Rome prided itself on being a bastion of justice, commerce, and engineering efficiency. The fact that today we can see Roman aqueducts, roadbeds, theaters, forums, gods, and goddesses is a testament to the empire’s achievements. Like all empires the Roman order came at a price. Emperors used their considerable legions of warriors to conquer and subdue any group that opposed them. The Pax Romana was based on military and economic might. Emperors were considered to be gods who held the power of life and death.

Within this empire the Christian movement was born as a sect within Judaism. The first followers of Jesus were virtually all Jews. Paul was not only a Pharisee but also one who was proud of his heritage. Thinking he was defending his heritage he persecuted followers of Jesus until he became one of those followers. Over a period of several years Paul understood his call to be an apostle to the world at large.

As Paul dictates Romans to his scribe he wishes to explore as fully as possible his understanding of the gospel so that the congregation in Rome will better appreciate who and whose they were and what it means to live faithfully in the Roman Empire. As Paul tells us in the letter he had for some time wished to visit Rome and engage the congregation in person. Paul planned such a visit as part of a longer trek—a missionary journey to Spain.

It is no accident that Paul’s most thorough expression of his understanding of the gospel is in the Letter to the Romans. He is sending a message to the church in the world’s capital and ultimately to the empire itself.

During his reign as Emperor, Augustus Caesar was called, “Lord,” “Savior,” “Redeemer,” and “Liberator”. He was referred to as Divine, Son of God, and God from God. These references were more than political propaganda or exaggeration. They expressed the “theology” of the Empire to which nations and individuals were expected to subscribe.

When Christians proclaimed Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Savior they were deliberately denying Caesar his highest title. They were engaging in treason. In the early days of Christianity in Rome, Christians and Jews were sometimes referred to as atheists because of their rejection of the Emperor’s divinity. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright describes the issue in these words: “Paul is coming to Rome with the gospel message of Jesus the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world, claiming, that through this message, God’s justice was unveiled once and for all. Rome prided itself on being, as it were, the capital of justice, the source from which justice would flow throughout the world” (IB, 404). Pressing the point further John Crossan says: “How does the gospel of the divine Caesar differ from that of the divine Christ? How does it differ not just in name, but in content, and not just in theory, but in practice? . . .Who now is Caesar, and where now is Christ?” (Search of Paul, 12)

Lest we think these questions are about the distant past rather than the present, consider how little the underlying assumptions of what makes for peace have changed. Rome’s recipe for peace was military conquest, administrative order, and economic viability endowed by Caesar’s divinity. Our world most often sees peace as a product of military power, administrative order, and economic viability. True, citizens no longer consider heads of state as divine unless you happen to live in North Korea. Rome’s motto was “Peace through Victory”. Paul’s vision seen through the lens of Jesus is “Peace through Justice”.

Columnist Michael Gerson in an editorial last week wrote about contrasting visions of presidential leadership in our nation’s history. One vision is that the strong must assert power, humiliate their opponents, and defeat whoever stands in their way. Gerson suggested that Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson were examples of this model of leadership. Yes, he acknowledged Nixon and Johnson accomplished significant goals in their presidencies. He then suggested most of us would be reluctant to hold up either man as a model for virtue or honor. The two examples Gerson suggested for a leadership that inspires were Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. He readily acknowledged that Lincoln and Roosevelt were flawed human beings. Yet, they inspired a nation. Inspiring leaders, Gerson opined, are often those who identify with the weak. Lincoln likely developed this sensitivity in the suffering he experienced as a child of poverty. Roosevelt, though a person of inherited wealth, likely had an enlarged capacity for empathy rooted in his suffering with polio. Gerson concludes by saying that the justice of a political system is measured by its treatment of the vulnerable and weak. That standard of justice is much closer to Paul’s than that of empire.

In this setting of “First Justice then Peace” versus “First Victory then Peace” hear again Paul’s words from our text today: “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father! It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

What does Paul mean by living according to the flesh? Is he saying that our physical life is evil, that our bodies are to be denigrated ? No Way! A better interpretation for our time would be to say that living according to the flesh is living according to selfishness, living according to empire. Life according to the Spirit means living according to self-giving, living according to the new creation.

How is such a life possible? It begins with recognition of both the possibilities of life lived differently than our world ordinarily does and acknowledgment of however unintentionally we participate in structures that are far from life-giving. For instance we who live in the wealthiest country on earth and take for granted our affluence in the midst of the world’s poverty need to rethink what it means to have such resources. One estimate of the amount of money needed to end worldwide hunger is 30 billion dollars. That amount may seem mind staggering. Consider that 30 billion versus the 600 billion dollars we spend annually on defense.

If Jesus is to be Lord of the world for the 1st century church in Rome and for us dwelling in Pax Americana, then believers are to share God’s vision seeking redemption with the world in its daily life. Said another way, Paul invites the church at Rome to live within a much larger horizon than their empire. They are to live within the horizon of God’s new creation. In that horizon the question is not what is best for me or my country? The question is what is best all of our brothers and sisters? What is best for our world and the creation itself?

Recently the documentary series, INDEPENDENT LENS, featured Reverend Rob Schenk, an evangelical minister in Washington, D.C. who is an advocate for the sacredness of life. For many years Rob has been an anti-abortion activist. A few years ago Schenk met Lucy McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis. Jordan was an unarmed teenager gunned down by a middle aged man in Florida.  The incident began when Dunn allegedly confronted Davis and his companions, objecting to the volume of the music being played in their vehicle. A verbal argument ensued to which Dunn responded by retrieving a loaded handgun from his car and shooting 10 rounds into the teenagers' car, fatally injuring Jordan. Russell Davis, the man who killed Jordan, defended his actions under Florida’s “Stand your Ground” law which allows one person to shoot another if s/he feels threatened. Schenk was profoundly touched by Lucy McBath and her determination that her son’s death not be in vain. Schenk began to ask his fellow evangelicals whether being pro-gun was consistent with being pro-life? Schenk’s raising questions about the gun lobby in the U.S. and widespread evangelical support for the lobby cost him support. Some fellow evangelicals severed ties with him. Donors to his anti-abortion organization ceased funding it. Yet, Schenk persists in his view that all life is sacred, that a response to the our gun culture means raising hard questions about violence and faith.

As we imagine ourselves sitting by Paul as he dictates his letter to the church at Rome, what questions do we ask ourselves? What priorities do we raise for the church of which we are a part and for the worldwide church? Is our commitment to God’s new creation revealed in Jesus? If so how will that commitment affect our daily values and actions? If indeed by the Spirit’s stirring we are heirs of God, where will that Spirit lead us?