

Do not become proud, but stand in awe

Romans 11:1-2, 29-36

A sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

The first eight chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans set out in logical form how salvation works. Then in Romans 9-11 Paul uses the Jewish people as a case study, an example of how salvation works.

In our text for today, Paul reaches the pinnacle, that is, having wrestled with the Jewish question, he can do no other than stand in awe, as he says in Romans 11:20: "So do not become proud, but stand in awe."

Paul's case study presents the problem: Why have the Jewish people not followed their Messiah? How is it possible they do not believe? God's promises do not fail. His covenants with the Jews have not changed. Why then do they not confess Jesus as Lord? What do we say about this?

What follows as Paul wrestles with the question is daring and challenging. Just watch what he does.

He first says: Remember election. God chooses; God elects. Like with Jacob and Esau, as it says: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:13). And the word "hated" is really there.

Paul then says: Remember the plagues in Egypt and how God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Romans 9:17-18). That happens, too. And that's not all.

Remember the potter and the clay (Isaiah 64:8; Jeremiah 18:6; Romans 9:19-23). God is the potter; we are the clay. The clay does not say to the potter: "Hey, you are not doing it right. You should do it otherwise." We like to think that we're calling the tune, but no way. The Lord is doing everything his way.

But the Jews were bent on establishing their own righteousness (Romans 10:2-4), and Paul warns Jew and Gentile alike that trusting in our own works leads to the abyss, not to salvation.

The way of salvation is God's doing because only God himself could solve the problem. Even the Old Testament says there will be a new and different covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33). Yet, in another sense, there is but one covenant. God does not change his mind or break his covenant.

So, he solved the problem outside of us, in spite of us, on the cross. And now he comes to us outside of us, in spite of us “. . . by hearing, and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

What then about the Jews? Paul says that they are like the root of the olive tree (Romans 11:13-15). They are the starting point. We are the wild olive branches that later on are grafted in. The fruit of the tame olive will be brought in just as the fruit of the wild olive will be brought in.

Thus, “do not become proud, but stand in awe” (Romans 11:20).

“For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). What God says is so, and what God says, he does.

Paul then writes: “For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:32).

That means that when Paul is asked about whether there are two ways of salvation, he is saying: No. There is one: the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. (In Galatians 6:16 he even calls the church the “Israel of God.”)

Then comes the “awe” of Romans 11:20, exploding in praise: “O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33).

We must be very careful that we do not misunderstand what Paul is doing.

There are ways of getting it wrong.

First, there’s the Eeyore way of getting it wrong. That is the hopeless view that God is like fate: “We don’t understand it; we can’t do anything about it; we just have to grin and bear it.”

The second way of getting it wrong is the party-animal way, which says: “Let’s eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die” (Isaiah 22:13, seven hundred years before Christ; 1 Cor 15:24: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’”) It’s like the old adage: Living well is the best revenge.

The third way of getting it wrong is over-the-barrel view, that is, thinking you have God over a barrel, that he has to be forgiving because that’s his nature, his métier (Heinrich Heine, 1850). He can do no other; he has to be forgiving, so I’ve got it made; I’ve got him over a barrel. But that’s not the case.

Finally, the right way of getting what Paul is saying is the way of Job. Remember Job, all his troubles and trials, and most of all, remember the heated debate between the Lord and Job (Job 38-42).

The Lord interrogates Job: "Where were you when I created the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4). It goes on for three chapters like this! "Who do you think you are? I am the Creator, and you are the creature. I'm infinite and you are finite. Who are you to think that you can tell me what I can do and must do!?"

But that's not the end of the story, the end of Job. At the end, Job says: "I thought I knew you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you . . . and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

Job's real problem is not that God is infinite and Job is finite. No. Job's real problem was that he was judging God.

That is, after all, the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." And we like to say: "Lord, we'll tell you how you ought to do it." We really put ourselves above him. That is how we then become the idol we worship.

Paul is saying: Let God be God: "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33).

Unsearchable, inscrutable. These are ways of saying *absconditus*, hidden. His ways are not our ways. Who and what is "all Israel" (Romans 11:26)? This is God's business. God's problem, not ours. He handles it.

And he is also the revealed God, revealed on the cross, solving the problem of sin and rising from the dead.

Then Paul takes two lines from Isaiah that are like the Book of Job and ends with a doxology: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever."

This glorious passage belongs with 1 Corinthians 1 in which Paul is writing much in the same vein (1 Cor 1:18-21):

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power and wisdom of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not

God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

Amen