

St Luke's Modbury, 7th June 2026

Genesis 12:1-9, Romans 4:13-25, Matthew 9:9-13 & 18-26

Today, before we begin the story I'd like to paint the background;
Two words. 'Roman church.' -Let your imagination wander.

Now, scrap all the pictures that just came to mind!

There's no St Peter's Basilica, no Sistine Chapel, no Pope or saints as we know them. In fact, no church buildings of any kind. In Paul's day, Rome had about one million people. Most lived in crowded tenements. Sprinkled among them were anything from 100 to, tops, 500 Christians; no-one quite knew how many. But they say it started when some Jewish-background believers returned from the Acts Pentecost, full of enthusiasm! They get together whenever they can for worship and shared meals, meeting in the homes of whoever has space. And a few God-fearing Gentiles have joined them. That's the church!

Now, the story.

In engaging with the Romans, Paul has to address a unique situation. It was all Emperor Claudius's fault! A few years ago, he'd got fed up with civil unrest in his domain. The Romans didn't like the Jews, some of the Jewish groups didn't like each other, and nobody liked this funny new Christ-loving sub-branch. So Claudius thought he'd make his own life easier by just expelling all the Jews from Rome. That was in the year 49, and the church fellowships had had to continue as small Gentile-only congregations. -That's until Claudius died in the year 54. Jewish-run businesses started to trickle back into Rome then, and their families into the church. Paul is writing about two years into this returning.

The Jewish background believers were disturbed to find that all of the Old Testament background seems to have been set aside. For them, in forgetting the key Scriptural events preceding the birth of Jesus, significance and continuity were lost. Paul is Jewish himself – they know he'll understand.

He did. None of them could forget a keynote event about two thousand years earlier concerning their founding father, Abraham. He had won a military battle¹ but peace wasn't very secure – he half expected the enemy to come back for another go. And without a son and heir to secure his succession, who knows who might take their land? So having a son was a big deal.

It seemed impossible that Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, would ever have their own descendants. Abraham's body is described as 'as good as dead.' But that's what God said would happen, and Abraham had faith in God, who brings the dead to life. For him, that meant the bringing of new life through his and Sarah's worn-out bodies. And sure enough, Sarah gave

¹ Abraham won a decisive military victory against four allied kings to rescue his nephew Lot (Genesis 14)

birth to Isaac. Paul likens Abraham's validated trust to our trusting in God who brought us new life when he raised Jesus from the dead.

They all knew, from Genesis,² that Abraham's blessing wasn't intended to benefit just one nation, but for all. So Paul, ever-practical, is looking ahead. World-wide blessing will involve world-wide apostles, and Rome is a potential launching pad. For starters, he had it lined up as a stepping stone for launching a mission to Spain. Spain's a long way away – it's almost like us sending astronauts to set up a base on the moon from which to colonise Mars. And in that sort of situation, base relationships have to be sorted out first. So Paul tells the Romans, 'God has created a family where we're all saved by trusting God's promise, not by our own excellence.' He pictures a church where believing Jews and believing Gentiles together will know that they have new life on the basis of God's promise.

While thinking about cases of undeserved grace in our own times, I recalled an unconventional sample. In 1986, Elton John did a tour with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. He had his band as well: the orchestra more or less acted as a giant stage prop. The players enjoyed an unaccustomed amount of reflected glory; even if you're used to performing with famous people, this tour attracted a bigger-than-usual contingent of media followers and groupies. After the final show, the orchestral players, along with Elton's band and any number of semi-gate-crasher hangers-on were kicking on in the hotel. It was a wind-down party, with an open bar tab. Eventually the proprietor announced, 'The rules say I have to stop serving soon, or we could get fined.' Elton wasn't impressed. He glanced around the room and shrugged. 'That's ok, I'll pay the fine.' I guess if the kingdom is yours, you can do what you like!

Of course, God's grace is a lot deeper than celebrity generosity, but it's an instance of our leaning on a big name who was showing unmerited largesse to just about all comers. Similarly, our view of grace as St Paul describes it, shifts the origin off ourselves onto a greater name, one who could do what we couldn't ourselves. That changes the big life-question from 'Am I good enough?' to 'Is Jesus good enough?'

Shifting that focus off our own merit and onto God's goodness isn't always easy. In today's gospel reading, you'd think it might have been an obstacle for Matthew (Levi) too. On one level he had everything you could want, but he was missing friendships, including the most important relationship anyone can have.

When Jesus offered Matthew, a despised tax collector, a life with him and his followers, Matthew left the old life, for the new. And it seems he was able to use some of his past benefits for the good of the early Christians; his profession had bought him a house with enough space to accommodate fellow believers. He could also read and write fluently at a time when most people couldn't. On their travels, he apparently kept a record of the group's activities, later to be recorded in the gospel under his name.

² Genesis 12:3

The synagogue leader might have had trouble sacrificing his self-reliance too. He had to set aside some of his personal standing in order to ask for help from Jesus. Of course, he grasped the chance to save his daughter's life.

The third individual Matthew described was an ordinary woman, apparently nobody of note. She was also unclean. But she'd heard a bit about Jesus. In Jewish tradition, the deliberate touching of a rabbi's cloak conveyed your acknowledgement that God is with him and your desire to align with that same God.³

So the woman risked public embarrassment, the synagogue leader risked hostility from colleagues, and Matthew lost friends in high places without being sure how the other disciples would receive him. In terms of what we stand to lose by coming out as Christian, I've known of a few people who have relinquished a promising secular career either in favour of a life given to ministry, or who have changed work for ethical reasons. They became convicted that they could no longer earn a living that depended on milking other people.

Publicly taking God's hand, accepting the new life he has provided, will probably get mixed reactions from others. Long gone are the days when political candidates or other public figures would seek to be photographed with a known Christian, like a minister or priest, to lift their standing. As in New Testament times, our main motivation is pruned back to the simple truth of the gospel.

Like Abraham, we walk forward trusting God's promise.

Like Matthew, we leave the old table behind.

Like the Roman church, we become one family, all not because we earned it, but because Christ did.

Amen

³ Zechariah 8:20-23