

Jeremiah 10: 1-16; Romans 11: 25-36

I felt somewhat compelled, and perhaps against my better judgement, to tackle the New Testament reading from that letter well known for its powerful theological expositions as well as its ability to confuse and bewilder. Paul reaching out to the Christians in Rome.

Paul's personal mission is to make sure that the Gentiles know the Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – that they are now able to be direct beneficiaries of God's promises, grace and forgiveness.

But in this chapter Paul shows especial concern for his fellow Jews who appear to have mucked up so much that they have been struck from the tree of life; it seems that they have lost their chance and others now have the favoured status. These are his people and I sense a great depth of concern for them and what he describes as their stubbornness in not recognising Jesus as their Messiah. He is at pains to explain that they will never cease to be God's beloved because the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Possibly like you, the large majority of my family and friends are not active followers of Jesus, and so far there is no evidence that my presence in their lives is making any difference.

I could despair at that but I'm not convinced that that would be a good response. First and foremost that is because from my own experience, it was not just one person's words and actions that helped to bring me to belief, and because, one of the actual motivators for my seriously considering the possibility that God exists, was not an action that you would plan if you were putting together an evangelical programme – it was just a group of Christian students who spent their Sundays having a lie in, inviting friends to their house for afternoon tea and then pottering out to an evening service. And as far as I know this lifestyle example only had a transforming effect on me but many enjoyed their cake and chatter!

God works in mysterious ways and especially it seems when it comes to the how and when and to whom he chooses to make sure God's presence is noticed.

I understand that it is my joy and responsibility to share what I know about God with others and especially with those who do not believe but it seems to me that this is best done when it is done at the invitation of the other. What I can do is make myself known as someone who can be asked and be trusted to respond with gentleness and truth as best I know it.

What God asks of us is to love our neighbours as ourselves. This is a high standard, something to aspire to and to be grateful that God is merciful when, as we surely will, we fail. And as you will recall, when Jesus was asked who is my neighbour he answered by telling a story that put me in the place of the victim and said: **'who would you want to act as a neighbour to you'** – leading to the answer that I would be glad for my neighbour to be the Samaritan, the one I thought was my enemy, someone I thought was my inferior, someone I thought was not special to God.

If God asks me to behave in this way to others, how much more must God act in this way. God's love is for everyone, God's grace knows no boundaries.

The peace and joy that comes from knowing and learning about God is the greatest gift I will receive in this lifetime. I do not know why I should be honoured to be blessed with faith and I would love, more than anything, for everyone to live their lives blessed in this way. But I believe that if God would have me love all his creation and especially humankind in this overflowing way, then how much more must he love them and be gracious and merciful to them, in this life and beyond.

As Paul is confident that the Jews have not been abandoned by God although the focus of the story God is creating has changed, so I am confident that God holds the unbelieving probably even closer to his centre than he holds us who have already acknowledged God's love and live in its light.

Thank God for God!