

One of the absolutely essential tools to understand the letter to the Romans when I was at University was John AT Robinson's "*Wrestling with Romans*". He clearly had a sense of humour, since if it comes to a wrestling match, rather him than me (but somehow the idea of a slight-of-stature academic Anglican bishop going three rounds, (or less, probably) with a few pasta-packed Italians brings a smile to my face.

There has been much misunderstanding about St Paul. When I was about thirteen the New English Bible New Testament was published (the Old Testament came later) and the church where I was in the choir adopted it as an experiment, not without a fair deal of opposition, as you can probably imagine. One elderly lady stated haughtily, "If the Authorised Version was good enough for St Paul, it is good enough for me".

But Paul can appear an enigmatic figure. He belonged to the Jewish group of Pharisees, scholarly lawyers who believed that the way for God to rid them of the Romans and to repossess their Promised Land for themselves was to get the whole nation to live absolutely within the letter of the Jewish law, all 613 of them. No small ask. Paul had been commissioned by the Sanhedrin, the powerful ruling body of the Jews in first century Judaea, or Israel if you like, to root out 'Christianity', this new and potentially dangerous Jewish sect, which had spread at least as far as Damascus, the capital of Syria. This Sanhedrin was seriously powerful in the governance of the Jewish State, a tributary state of the Romans who did not want any trouble. Perhaps Paul was too young to be a full member of the Sanhedrin, but they must have thought highly of him to give him such an important task.

Paul's letter to the Romans has often been accused of being rather impenetrable, and it's not helped when we realise that Paul did not actually write it; he employed an amanuensis, much, perhaps, as today we would employ a lawyer to act for us, take our instructions. This man even tells us his name at the end of the letter ('I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord') who presumably wrote what Paul dictated. Paul probably couldn't write in any halfway recognisable sense, but I wonder what his correspondence would have been like if he had access to a word processor and the worldwide web. Also, Paul had never been to visit the Christian church in Rome. It must have been founded by someone else, but that does not stop him issuing detailed instructions to them.

The book of Romans has two main interlinked thrusts. That the word "Sin" occurs 40 times in the letter is the key to one; the relationship to the Law given by God and Sin is paramount. Slavish adherence to the letter of the law, even if that were possible, will not bring salvation, since if there were no law, there would be no sin. The ideal is a type of utopian state where no law is necessary – heaven in other words – so Paul is keen to sweep away the 613 laws of Moses and retain just the two greatest commandments, Love God, Love Your Neighbour. Given that Paul was a Pharisaic lawyer, that's a pretty radical move. The other main theme is that it is not possible to be justified in God's eyes simply by doing good works to one's neighbour. You can be the most kind, generous, thoughtful, helpful, etc, etc person, but that will not get you into heaven; that takes Faith. So for Paul, justification, becoming sin-free, can only be achieved by Faith alone. This is what all this argument concerning Abraham is about. Abraham had been forced to move from his homeland in Chaldea, what we now call Iran and Iraq, probably because of a severe crop failure towards the end of the neo Sumerian era. He took his whole entourage, a huge undertaking as he seemed to be the head of a large extended family, complete with numerous servants and slaves. This large group would have wandered around the Fertile Crescent, along the rich banks of the Tigris and Euphrates in Babylonia, into Assyria and Armenia and then south along the River Jordan, taking them through modern-day South-East Turkey, Syria and Lebanon as well as Iran and Iraq. In the area we now call Israel he encountered God and his great act of unqualified faith was to accept that he would have a son of his own at the age of 99. He had had no sons and his heir was an adult male slave born into his family. His wife, Sarah, was 90 and she found this harder to accept, not surprisingly, and laughed. Thus, when their child was born, they called him

'laughter', Isaac or Yitshak in modern Hebrew. All Abraham's behaviour and leadership were nothing to God and could only be boasted of to fellow men. His righteousness came solely from his faith in God, not from anything he had done.

Nicodemus, however, was a member of the afore mentioned Sanhedrin and came to Jesus by night (ie, secretly) to seek from Jesus a deeper understanding of his teaching. Only John's gospel mentions him and he appears twice more, once when he intervened to argue that Jesus must not be condemned without being heard, and again after the crucifixion when he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus's body, bringing with him a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about a hundred pounds. The apocryphal 'Acts of Pilate' has been ascribed to Nicodemus (although it's not a riveting read!). Jesus tells him that The Kingdom of Heaven is entered, not by moral achievement, but by a transformation wrought by God "you must be born from above" and "no one can enter the Kingdom of heaven without being born of water" (referring to baptism) "and of spirit" (with its echoes of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, where God says 'I will cause breath to enter you' to the fragmented body of the nation of Judah he is reconstructing). Poor Nicodemus doesn't understand this; still thinking literally rather than spiritually, he asks how one can enter into the mother's womb and be reborn. Jesus draws on the ambiguity between the words wind, breath and spirit, which are all the same word - πνεῦμα (pneuma). This is in Greek admittedly, but the ambiguity is there in Hebrew and Aramaic as well. So, the crux of this passage is the penultimate verse; "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life." Martin Luther called this the "Gospel in Miniature", and who am I to argue with that.

This is a whole new lifestyle for Nicodemus and all devout Jews. They believed that wealth, health and prosperity were rewards from God for good works and so looked down on those less fortunate than themselves; they revelled in the assurance of God's favour, looking upon themselves with pride and some arrogance. Jesus is debunking all this – rewards are in heaven, not in this world.

Thus both Epistle and Gospel offer the same interpretation:- Justification, being made utterly sin-free by a faith which is total and unsullied; in other words, it does *not* matter what you do, what you have done, what you will do (all that merely points to the fragility and imperfections of human resolve); as long as you have faith in God through Christ crucified and resurrected, you will become Just, Honourable, Worthy, in God's eyes. So it's that easy; . . . or difficult.