

Sunday 18 October 2020

Encourage One Another

Romans 16:1-16 Greet one another

Lord of all,

help us to come to you not just as an outward gesture,
but in heart and mind and soul.

Help us to make space in our hectic lives
to be still in your presence,
and so may we live in you and you in us.

Accept us now as we come to you,
and use us for your kingdom.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 93.

- 1 The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
- 2 your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.
- 3 The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.
- 4 More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!
- 5 Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, forevermore.

Some passages of Scripture grab our attention and imagination. Others, like Romans 16:1-16, our passage today, are easy to skip over it. After all, it's just a list of unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce names. But if we pause and reflect for a moment, we may learn some important lessons. Paul concludes this list with a simple instruction:

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Romans 16:16. See also 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Peter 5:14, and 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26)

Romans 16 contain the longest list of names in the New Testament. Those named seem to be a cross-section of the church in Rome. Five times Paul explicitly refers to a community ('family' = 'household') gathered around an individual or couple. These are probably house groups that made up the church in Rome. Maybe others named are also leaders of small groups, and Paul is finishing his letter with a time-honoured, "It only remains for me to thank..." being careful not to

miss anyone (we all know what offence that can cause). This is a diverse group. There are men and women, and several different nationalities. (The list includes Jewish, Greek and Latin names.)

Although Romans is often referred to as Paul's most theological letter, the two chapters preceding this list are intensely practical and are concerned with how Christians live together. This list, then, is saying that these chapters are not just a theoretical idea but that they apply to real people. So, when Paul writes, for example, "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." (15:1) he is not making a vague generalization, but rather giving specific instruction to this named group.

But that is not the end of the matter. These instructions are not just for the leaders and prominent Christians in ancient Rome. The final verse of this list is addressed to all. The whole church, including me and you, are gathered into this fellowship of believers as we are called to greet one another. Sixteen times in as many verses Paul tells the fellowship to greet others. To greet someone was to bless them, to offer peace and grace. This is to be done sincerely (or as Paul puts it, with holy intention), not just as a formality. This reflects Paul's desire that believers should live at peace with one another, an idea found throughout his letters, and itself a reflection of Jesus' resurrection greeting to his disciples, "Peace be with you."

Who will I greet today, and will I do it with holy intention?

Pause and pray

Paul followed his own advice. His holy greetings give us some profound prayers that still speak to us today.

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Gracious God,
take our faith, flawed though it is,
our love, poor though it may be,
and our commitment, for all its imperfections,
and use us in your service
to make known your gracious purpose,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.