

The Righteousness of God through Faith in Jesus Christ (chapters 1-8)

The Apostle and his Commission (1:1-7)

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience to the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In ancient times a letter began with the sender's name and greetings. This does the same. But one thing becomes clear at once: this man does not write in a private capacity but as the representative of his Lord. His name disappears beneath that of his principal, and his greeting contains already the great message which he has to deliver. He introduces himself as someone who has and wants nothing for himself. The commission which he has received is his life. He is a messenger and nothing else.

His mission has its basis in the ancient revelation contained in the Scriptures of the Old Testament but whose real content is actually the Son of God, the man Jesus from the tribe of David who, nevertheless, is the Son of God through the Holy Spirit,

one with him in essence (Phil. 2: 6). Only through and since the resurrection from the dead, which set him free from the weakness of the flesh, has this sonship manifested itself in power. The Son is the sum and substance of the good News, for the delivery of which he, this Lord, has graciously prepared and set apart Paul as his servant. It is good news for all. Although it deals with Israel's Messiah promised in the Old Testament, it is also meant for the Gentile nations; for he wants to be known and acknowledged by all as the Lord. Paul introduces himself to the Roman Community as the one who has been commissioned to win all Gentiles for Jesus. They, the Romans and he, although they have never seen one another, are from the very beginning surrounded by the one grace and love of God the Father, revealed in Christ the Lord and communicated through the Holy Spirit.

In this the theme of the whole letter is already indicated. From God's side the lordship of Christ, the revealer of God's love; from man's side the "obedience of faith". Faith is Christ really becoming my Lord, and Christ cannot become my Lord in any other way save by my knowing and my acknowledging him in whom God claims me as his own. This act of becoming Lord is God's programme for humanity and the world, which is not only to be proclaimed by his envoy but also realized by him.

The Persons and the Subject-Matter (1:8-17)

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, ¹⁰asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, ¹²that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and

to the foolish: ¹⁵so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

The strictest objective approach is here also completely personal. First of all the apostle is grateful to God for what has happened to the Roman Community. Paul knows nothing of a faith which is so concealed that nothing of it is visible. The whole world speaks of the faith of the Roman brethren, and this calls for gratitude. The Holy Spirit who arms him for prayer and service is the same one who binds him in heart with the Christians in Rome, and so he is longing for personal fellowship with them. Fellowship, however, is mutual exchange. He too, the apostle, wants not only to give but also to receive. The apostle is no prince of the Church who only gives out, but a brother desirous of encouragement from his fellow-brethren. Yet this humble man thinks in continents as he reflects on his task. At the beginning and end of his letter he allows us to have a look at his world-embracing strategy of mission. He is the fisher of men in the grand style. Thus runs his commission from the very start (cp. Acts. 9: 15-16). How could he who, as the first to be entrusted with the mystery that the Gentiles as well as the Jews were destined for the redemption of the Messiah (Eph. 3), pass by Rome, the metropolis of the world!

What Rome meant then is almost beyond our comprehension. We must imagine as one all the capital cities of our own day together, from New York and London to Tokyo. He, the Jewish itinerant preacher, is to conquer Rome for Christ. By what means? By the message of a Galilean who was executed as a criminal! In face of the wisdom and might of Rome, to set up the "foolishness of the Cross", this glorification of the powerless one! But the apostle's thought barely touches upon what might have been so natural, namely, the failing of his courage when confronted by this contrast. There are no inferiority complexes here and no false humility, but an unbroken consciousness of power. "I am not ashamed; for it