

There are some occurrences that, though they share the appearance of everyday, unremarkable things, you just know spell trouble.

Driving down a windy country road a small black car suddenly appears out of nowhere behind you. It could be simply that you've been distracted by the fascinating Hungarian avant garde retrospective on Radio 3 the past few minutes and not previously noticed; and the young man and his friends in the car behind have been lost in Ligetti too and that's why he's driving 2 centimetres from your back bumper; and his gesticulating friend is obviously so carried away with the atonal Magyar music that he's pretending to conduct it. With one finger. Of course! Something in the deeper recesses of your limbic system though, knows what this is, and the intuition says this is not this a nice shared cultural experience thanks to the BBC but this is 'trouble' and you are, at the very least, going to be harassed for miles.

Perhaps you are lying in bed and suddenly feel the icy cold drip of water on your forehead. It might just be a miniscule localised atmospheric disturbance causing precipitation in your boudoir and you'll be a world-famous meteorological sensation but something instinctual at the back of your mind puts up a red flag, remembers your bed is sited directly under the water tank and starts quietly but persistently repeating 'trouble'!

Perhaps the post is on the doormat and amid all the prizes you've won, and those colourful leaflets detailing the latest weird and wacky way the council's dreamed up of not collecting your bins, there is an official looking, anonymously confident brown envelope with URGENT stamped in red with some impressive crest on the back and threateningly powerful initials. Of course it could be a letter telling you you've finally come up trumps on those premium bonds bought for you at your birth and there's £1M waiting for you to collect, but that little part of your brain that deals with reality knows it's more likely to be trouble: the IR telling you they've been miscalculating your tax for the past 30 years and you owe them the monetary equivalent of your immortal soul, or the highways agency informing you of the compulsory purchase of your house at 1930s prices. It's that one brown envelope you know instinctively means trouble. St Paul's Letter to the Romans must have come in just such an envelope.

There have been times down the centuries when the Church or at least large parts of it has wished that Paul had sent a postcard to Rome saying 'Weather's nice in Corinth, wish you were here' instead of the profound and disturbing theological treatise that is his letter to the Romans. Times such as when Marcion read it, came over all peculiar and got funny ideas about two Gods and elastic morality; or when the bishop of Hippo noticed the part about justification and used his Augustinian logic to arrive at the thoroughly unchristian doctrine of double predestination which has dogged the West ever since; or when Luther re-read it and read there a manifesto for the rending of the Catholic church. Let's not even think about John Calvin.

So why is the Letter to the Romans such a firebrand in Christianity? Why is it for many trouble with a capital 'T'? The trouble with the letter to the Romans is not that it contains dense and difficult theology, though it certainly does. It's not that it's first part can be misinterpreted to allow those with a particular agenda to persecute minorities. It's not just that Paul wrote it two thousand years before he *could* have read *Eats Shoots and Leaves* and so fails to pepper the flow of his wisdom with anything resembling sufficient punctuation. The trouble with Romans is faith.

Romans has a lot to say about faith. The letter is really an extended treatise on the subject. Much of what it says is very difficult to understand, the implications of what it says are perhaps impossibly so. [And the kernel of the disturbance, the eye of the storm of this most tempestuous of letters if you like, was, I am happy to report our New Testament reading this morning.]

The point where it becomes undeniable that a storm is brewing, the part where bits of plaster accompany the water dripping from the ceiling, comes a few chapters [earlier in the letter] (in) when Paul discusses the promise of God to Abraham. This promise, Paul says, was made not because Abraham was a scrupulous observer of the law, not because he was a good man who did what he was told, but because he had faith. He may have done all fantastically good and noble and pious things but this could not have justified him in God's sight: justification is not like collecting enough green shield stamps or Sainsburys schools vouchers.

Now in one sense - and this is the actual sense of the troublesome first part of the letter so beloved by the perpetually morally outraged- Paul is simply having the same argument that John's gospel relates Jesus having with the Jewish crowd in the Temple. It is the if you like, hereditary argument. 'Abraham is our ancestor' goes the premise, 'therefore we are saved'. 'If you are saved, it is not because of your genetic inheritance' is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob's reply. And in this way Paul's letter to the Romans- Jewish Christian Romans- is simply saying 'you can't rely on your family tree'.

Well so far so good. But of course Romans goes further, much further. It's scope does not seem to be limited to the very specialist sense of the Jewish law, practice and its adherence. It is way beyond that. Paul reaches the peak of his crescendo [this morning] (when he says):

*And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

The thrust of the argument is approximately this:

God can do what he wants. Therefore it doesn't matter what you do, however good the things you do are, they cannot make God do anything. Anything God does- justifying you, saving you- is because he wants to do it *not* because anything you have done has compelled him to do it. *Therefore* anything that God does do for you - justifying you, saving you- is not something you have or indeed can ever have deserved, it is his free gift in response to your faith, which in its turn is not something you do, it is something *you* are given by God.

The logic of this argument is towering and powerful but it is also subtle. And of course one of the many things most of us throughout history are not very good at is subtle. Many have heard Paul's argument and come to the conclusion that if there is nothing I can do to merit salvation then it doesn't matter what I do: Party time! Some have heard this argument and come to the conclusion that if there is nothing I can do to merit salvation then God has already decided whether I am saved or not. End of party time!

My grandfather lived to the age of 102. For the last five or so years of his life he was quite, quite deaf. Having a conversation with him was a great labour of love because he refused to wear his hearing aid. This was not, on his part, vanity or delusion. It is because a hearing aid, unlike our ears, does not discriminate about what you are going to hear. It amplifies everything and sends it rushing in. This is fine if there is only one person speaking. But if you are in a room with say 10 people speaking, the television on, the dog barking and so on the hearing aid amplifies them all and funnels the lot into your ear. It cannot decide, like your ears and brain if they are in 20/20 order- what to ignore and what to concentrate on. Our scriptures consist of scores, perhaps hundreds of people all speaking at once, all at you and usually at the top of their voices. Trying to listen for God's Word in such a cacophony is just like wearing a hearing aid in the middle of a crowded room of conversationalists. It is not surprising if we might just turn it off or do the next best thing- which is historically what Christians have tended to do- which is to make sure we can only hear one voice. But nothing in our Bible happens in isolation. There is no one solitary voice. The Bible itself is a babbling, bubbling conversation and it is our tendency to listen to some voices more than others that can make things like St Paul's letter to the Romans such trouble.

It is impossible to know whether St James had read Paul's Letter to the Romans before he penned *his* letter; he would certainly have been familiar with the ideas it promulgates, for the letter of James contains one of the earliest and most stinging rebukes in the long history of Christian rebuke. 'Faith without works' James says 'is dead'. No prizes for guessing where that acid drop was aimed. If it isn't clear the earlier part of the letter makes it as explicit as it can without quite naming Paul by name.

*"Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works."*

Here is, how shall we put it, a robust exchange of views, not in General Synod or on the street corners but right in our Bible. Set forever like an insect in amber in the canon of our scripture is a searing disagreement, an unresolved argument of belief. Which is right and good. The voice of God speaking through our scriptures is

not one but many; it is one voice comprised of a diversity of voices, saying different, sometimes irreconcilable things; it is such a plurality of voices that any attempt to narrow down what we hear is not increasing the clarity of the message but gagging it, not bringing us closer to the truth, but taking us further away from it. There is no Christian voice, but each Christian has a voice. Different voices, saying different things. And we are most Christlike, most Christian not when we are shouting, but when we are listening.

*Fr Andrew Fenby 2017*