



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON ‘ROMANS’

Chapter 16

The concluding chapter in the Epistle to the Romans underscores the fact that the Epistle is not directly a theological tome: it is a personal letter from a Christian leader to a group of Christians, some of whom the leader had met in other cities.

We do not know much about many of the people named by St. Paul in Romans 16:1-16, 21-24: since many of the names were common among Roman slaves, it is likely that many were freed slaves the Apostle had met on his journeys. The fact that we can only conclusively identify a few of these people does not mean, however, that this chapter is unimportant, as St. John Chrysostom explains:

I think that many even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men, hasten over this part of the Epistle as superfluous, and having no great weight in it. And I think that the same befalls them in regard to the genealogy that is in the Gospel. For because it is a catalogue of names, they think they cannot get any great good from it. Yet the gold founders' people are careful even about the little fragments; while these pass over even such great cakes of gold. That this then may not befall them, what I have already said were enough to lead them off from their listlessness. For that the gain even from this is no contemptible one, we have shown even from what was said on a former occasion, when we lifted up your soul by means of these addresses. We will endeavor then today also to mine in this same place.

Despite the fact that the history of most of these early Christians is currently unknown to us, we nonetheless know about several of the people identified in Romans chapter sixteen.

St. Paul exhorts the Romans to greet St. Phoebe (whose feast day is September 3), who likely carried the Epistle to Rome (Romans 16:1). St. Phoebe is described as a “servant” of the Church; the word for servant - *diakonos* - is the same word for “deacon” (see the article, “Do I Use My Gifts?” for an examination of many of the meanings of *diakonos*). Commentators disagree on whether St. Phoebe served as a deaconess in the early Church. Many commentators, such as St. John Chrysostom, state that she was a deaconess. Fr. Lawrence Farley, however, says that she was not, arguing instead that - as a wealthy woman - she probably served the Church by opening her home for services.

St. Paul also tells the Romans to greet Ss. Priscilla and Aquila, who risked their own physical safety to assist the Apostle, and who continue their practice of allowing a church to meet in their home (Romans 16:3-5).

St. John Chrysostom, upon reading the name “Mary” listed among these early Christians (Romans 16:6), is struck by the importance of women to the Church, and emphasizes the lesson that men can learn from these holy women:

How is this? A woman again is honored and proclaimed victorious! Again are we men put to shame. Or rather, we are not put to shame only, but have even an honor conferred upon us. For an honor we have, in that there are such women amongst us, but we are put to shame, in that we men are left so far behind by them. But if we come to know whence it comes, that they are so adorned, we too shall speedily overtake them. Whence then is their adorning? Let both men and women listen. It is not from bracelets, or from necklaces, nor from their eunuchs either, and their maid-servants, and gold-broidered dresses, but from their toils in behalf of the truth.

He goes on to ask the Romans to greet Ss. Andronicus and Junia (whose feast day is May 17) (Romans 16:7). St. Andronicus of the Seventy was bishop of the Roman province of Pannonia (which incorporated such modern countries as Austria, Hungary, and Serbia), but he and St. Junia traveled abroad in missionary work. We do not know when they were imprisoned with St. Paul, but it was likely because of their successful evangelism, which reportedly resulted in many pagan temples closing and being converted into churches. When St. Paul numbers them among the apostles he does not mean that they are among the Twelve Apostles (as is he), but rather that they can be called apostles because they have faithfully engaged in the apostolic work of preaching the Gospel. They were martyred in the city that later became Constantinople.

After telling the Romans to greet each other with a “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16) - a moment in the Liturgy when Christians gave each other a ritual kiss as a sign of unity - St. Paul moves on to warn against listening to false and divisive teachers. He says that such individuals teach doctrine that differs from the Gospel taught by the Apostles, and that their goal was simply to deceive simple Christians in order to inflate both their egos and their financial holdings (16:18). St. Basil the Great, one of the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, teaches that Christians should avoid not only false teachers, but should avoid being deceived by the followers of these teachers: “As for all those who pretend to confess the sound Orthodox Faith, but are in communion with people who hold a different opinion, if they are forewarned and still remain stubborn, you must not only not be in communion with them, but you must not even call them brothers.”

In contrast to indulging in heresy, Christians should be “wise in what is good” (meaning experienced and knowledgeable in the true Christian faith and living), but “simple concerning evil” (meaning that we should not allow ourselves to be deceived or misled by heresy) (Romans 16:19). While the presence of heresy can be upsetting, we should not panic, because Christ will soon crush Satan and destroy all his wicked works (16:20).

Origen explains in the third century the identity of Timothy and St. Paul’s “fellow countrymen” (Romans 16:21):

Timothy is well known from the Acts of the Apostles, where it is recorded that he was from Derbe, the son of a believing widow and of a Gentile father (Acts 16:1). Paul asked him to remain at Ephesus in order to warn the people there not to teach anything different from what they had been taught nor to listen to myths and endless genealogies (1 Timothy 1:3-4). Lucius may have been the same person as Luke the Evangelist, because names are sometimes given in the native form and sometimes in the Greek or Roman one. Jason is the same person as the one who, when there were riots against Paul and Silas at Thessalonica, posted a bond for them so that they might have the freedom to preach (Acts 17:5-9).

Sosipater was the son of Pyrrhus, from Berrhoea (Acts 20:4)...Paul calls them all his kinsmen because, although they were Gentiles, they were his brethren in the faith.

The greeting from Tertius in Romans 16:22 is unique: it is the only verse in any epistle in which the scribe writing for St. Paul identifies himself.

St. John Chrysostom elaborates on the importance of mentioning Gaius and Erastus in verse 23:

When you hear that (Gaius) was Paul's host, do not admire him for his munificence only, but also for his strictness of life. For except he were worthy of Paul's excellency, he would never have lodged there, since he, who took pains to go beyond many of Christ's commands, would never have trespassed against that law, which bids us be very particular about who receive us, and about lodging with "worthy" persons. (Matthew 10:11.) "Erastus, the chamberlain of the city, salutes you, and Quartus a brother." There is a purpose in his adding "the chamberlain of the city," for as he wrote to the Philippians, "They of Caesar's household salute you" (Philippians 4:22), that he might show that the Gospel had taken a hold upon great folk, so here too he mentions the title with a view to the same object, and to show that, to the man who gives heed, neither riches are a hindrance, nor the cares of government, nor anything else of the kind.

St. Paul concludes his Epistle to the Romans with a benediction that summarizes the entire letter. St. Paul has taught - to the Romans and the world - the Gospel, a powerful message that had been hidden from the world until that astounding moment in time, where the full meaning of the prophetic Scriptures is now made available to all people, so that they might pursue "obedience to the faith" (Romans 16:25-26). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains the meaning and power of verse 27:

Finally...the apostle comes again to life up the God to whom glory to the ages is due through Jesus Christ. He is the only wise God. What is this wisdom, which He alone possesses? It is the plan of salvation – the astounding love that would cause Him to die for His enemies and thus transform them into His children and heirs, the unsearchable brilliance that could use the divisions between Jew and Gentile as the instrument to save both, the unfathomable mercy that shut up the whole world in a sinking solidarity of sin that it might have mercy upon all. This is their God, the God who has mercy and who saves. And it is His Gospel that Paul is called to bring to Rome - a single saving Gospel for all men.