

Romans 12, 9-21: A Radical Manifesto for Ordinary Life

Are you sitting comfortably? Now I'll begin. I want to take you back almost fifty years, to a leafy suburb of Darlington, at about this time of year. To the Arthur Pease Infant School Autumn term. Listen - you can hear the sound of kids in the playground. It is a very distinct and recognisable noise, little piping voices, a very minor hubbub; cries, squeals, maybe the occasional little chant, but no words you cannot recognise a word. I have even hear it used on a Mike Oldfield record, so it must be available on a sound-effects CD, 'playground in the next street'. It is only kid's playing, of all human activities the least consequential - or is it?.

Here is something that happened in that playground, in autumn 1953. At the north-east corner of the yard was a climbing frame, 4 bars high, 4 posts wide, with a taller bit in the middle ; the castle keep, or the conning tower of the submarine, or the cockpit of the aircraft. That is where I was that morning break, when Michael Jones said he was going to push me off the climbing frame. I don't recall that he actually did; just said he was going to, and I believed him.

A tiny incident, but one that had, I think, a major effect on my life. It was then, a few weeks after first going to school, I began to find out what the world was like, and that there were people who would hurt me, or at least threaten to, for no reason other than their own pleasure. It shook me profoundly, and I reacted in a very human way. By wanting to hit back; by wanting to push Michael Jones off the climbing frame himself. It was one of the deaths of childhood innocence, and quite a significant one, because I never forgot it. What was worse was that I was a coward, so never did dare to either threaten or actually do it; I had quickly learned that if I hit anyone, even if they had hit me first, they were likely to hit me back harder. I knew I couldn't win. So I just thought about it, and wished it, which is possibly far worse than doing it.

Anyone been there? Have you ever met Michael Jones on the climbing frame?

This is directly relevant to the passage in Romans 12 we have just hear read, and I will explain why. Look at the passage; what is Paul saying, can you sum it up in a phrase? It is as if he has loaded a whole lot of directives for Christian living into a cannon and blasted them all at us. At a rough count, 26 separate instructions, all within 12 verses.

At first glance, most of them are pretty obvious; most of them are about how to live alongside other people. A cynic might say they are just a few hints about how to be nice, and all religions tell you to be nice to each other (or at least to people of the same religion). What I want to say is take a second glance, and see that they are infinitely more than this. They are instructions for a lifestyle so radical that it makes Tony Benn look like Margaret Thatcher (well, Tony Blair), and they are profoundly unnatural.

Let me unpack. Come back to Michael Jones and the climbing frame. What that incident did was left me with a deep-rooted desire somewhere in my psyche which I wish I did not have, the desire to strike back. A common human phenomenon; years later I stumbled across it portrayed perfectly, if heavily tongue-in-cheek, on the Bonzos, 'Mr Apollo' ostensibly advertising body building.... (play sound bite)

This is natural, human, understandable, excusable but **directly contrary** to what Paul is driving at here. We, either as humans, singly, or as nations, collectively, learn, both by experiences of the sort I have described, or even have it handed down in our genes, to repay evil with evil. It's only fair, tit-for-tat. Even in the Old Testament they got away with it to some extent - eye for eye, tooth for tooth etc. But Jesus came along and turned everything round.

Let us look back at the passage and see some other things in there that are profoundly un-natural.

Hate what is evil - hate is natural enough, but hate what? What is evil, not Who. The rest of the passage makes this clear. Where do we mostly meet the evil we have to hate - in ourselves of course...

Honour one another above yourselves. So does sharing with others. Contradicts the basic laws of survival, Darwin's survival of the fittest, Boyd Dawkin's selfish gene.

Keep your spiritual fervour - OK Sunday night, what about Monday morning?

Be patient in affliction - but affliction is what makes us impatient

Bless those who persecute you....

Be willing to associate with people of low position. Is the class thing really dead? It was big when I was young, the unspoken understanding that so-and-so was 'working class', not really OK, not our sort of person.

These are that just pious thoughts for nice people to help them rub along together with a little less friction, they are rules for a battle, for hand-to-hand fighting with our egos. Remember last week Ervine talked about post-Renaissance man who had usurped the throne where God used to sit? Who was now master of his own destiny, whose theme song is that monstrous Frank Sinatra ballad 'I did it my way'. I was reminded of this week when I followed a black Merc along the military road; its number plate was TM 600, very discreetly altered, just a suggestion of reshaping the letters and numbers, so it read 'I'M GOD'. You have heard the phrase 'cherished number plates', the ones stupid people pay big money for. Well, that is the one we all naturally cherish, the one we want to drive under.

Now, if you meet Jesus, you have signed up for the most radical of all rebellions, that is rebellion against someone, a great controlling influence, that Jesus called the prince of this world. A book I read recently about Christians and music said a Christian should never like punk, because as a style it was inescapably linked to rebellion against authority. But in this sense we who are here this morning are only here because we are rebels, we are subversives, we are guerilla fighters. Not because we are nice....

And it is a battle; the enemy comes at you again and again, often in the most unexpected places. A couple of weeks ago we were in France, in Arles. There was a road sign you don't find round here. It had a red triangle and the silhouette of the head of a bull, with very long horns 'WARNING TAURINE MANIFESTATION'. A tradition in those parts is to spice up city life, which can get boring, by suddenly releasing herds of young and bad-tempered bulls into the streets, keeps the pedestrians on their toes, adds a bit of sport to your morning trip to the paper shop. Well, spiritual life is really a bit like that, you are toddling along just fine, listening to the birds singing, when there is suddenly a clatter of hooves behind you.

And this is a fight that we do not fight alone. We need each other. I have a weakness I have told you about, that is to wish, fervently, to repay evil with evil. Every time I hear of some atrocity on the radio a wave of anger sweeps over me, what-I-would-like-to-do to its perpetrators. This is me. This is not Jesus' way. I have not been cured of this one yet; I need you to help me. You may fall down in different ways; you may even need me to help you.

We die to self, as Ervine said, but for most of us it is death by a thousand cuts. As John the Baptist said, facing what was in human terms a miserable end, Jesus must increase, we must decrease. So we must; but we do not fade into the darkness, we fade into the light, and in the light we meet our true selves, the ones we were created and then redeemed to be. I believe that, I'm going for it, I'm nowhere near it yet. Lots of cuts to come.

There is a bit at the end I found awkward. This bit about 'Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay'. An avenging God, a wrathful God, I do not find easy. Jesus said if we saw him, we saw the Father. An avenging Jesus, a wrathful Jesus, is even more difficult. It chimes too much with a frightening and I know wrong image of God that some people seem to like, and which still occasionally glares out of my closet and troubles me.

The first message here is do not take revenge, in situations where natural law would allow you to. For a Christian that is out. But this awkward bit about, leaving room for God's wrath.... Does it mean standing clear of where, or who, you reckon the lightning is about to strike, clear enough to get a good view? Leaving someone, in the phrase that I learned in my childhood, to 'stew in their own juice'?

Sometimes this might be the case. Sometimes someone has pursued a course of action which brings sad and inevitable results that we can do nothing about. But here is another way of looking at it, which struck me on Tuesday morning, somewhere between Washington and Easington as I drove down the A19, with the prepare-this-talk cassette in my mental tape-player. Revenge, vengeance, righteous wrath is all getting what you deserve. And who got what we deserved.....? Maybe this is one more case of God turning this world's ideas upside down, in Jesus God, in love, took the consequences of our sins upon

himself; surely he has borne our iniquities prophesies Isaiah. So in leaving room for God's vengeance, we may be actually leaving room for his Grace. Not the big fist but the outstretched hands.

(Sing 'Strange Way')

Strange way to start a revolution
Strange way to get a better tan
Strange way to hold a power breakfast
Strange way to show your business plan
Strange way to see if wood would splinter
Strange way to do performance art
Strange way to say I'll see you later
Strange way to leave behind your heart

**Strange Dissident of Meekness, and nurse of tangled souls
How unlike the holy to end up full of holes**

Strange way to hang around for hours
Strange way to imitate a kite
Strange way to get a view of Auschwitz
Strange way to represent the light
Strange way to watch for stormy weather
Strange way to disprove gravity
Strange way to go around fund raising
Strange way to say I'm liberty

Strange Dissident of Meekness...

Strange way to test for haemophilia
Strange way to spend a happy hour
Strange way to down a bitter cocktail
Strange way to merchandise your power
Strange way to reassure your mother
Strange way to finish your world tour
Strange way to pose for all those painters
Strange way to gather in the poor

**Strange Dissident of Meekness, and nurse of tangled souls
How unlike the holy to end up full of holes.
The world is too much for us, can we not just elope
Strange way to draw us closer, strange way to give us hope..**

Strange way..