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July 31st: 1 Samuel 20 & Romans 1

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David and Jonathan. The gospel in a world of compounding sin.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Samuel 20 Then David fled from Niath in Ramah, and came and said before Jonathan, What have I done? What is my guilt? and what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? And he said to him, Far from it, you shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so.

But David vowed again, saying, Your father knows well that I have found favour in your eyes. And he thinks, Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved. But truly, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.

Then Jonathan said to David, Whatever you say, I will do for you. David said to Jonathan, Behold, tomorrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit at table with the king. But let me go that I may hide myself in the field till the third day at evening.

If your father misses me at all, then say, David earnestly asks leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the clan. If he says, Good, it will be well with your servant. But if he is angry, then know that harm is determined by him.

Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. But if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father? And Jonathan said, Far be it from you. If I knew that it was determined by my father that harm should come to you, would I not tell you? Then David said to Jonathan, Who will tell me if your father answers you roughly? And Jonathan said to David, Come, let us go out into the field.

So they both went out into the field. And Jonathan said to David, The Lord the God of Israel be witness, when I have sounded out my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, if he is well disposed toward David, shall I not then send and disclose it to you? But should it please my father to do you harm, the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also if I do not disclose it to you, and send you away, that you may go in safety. May the Lord be with you, as he has been with my father.

If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die. And do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth. And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, May the Lord take vengeance on David's enemies.

And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul. Then Jonathan said to him, Tomorrow is the new moon, and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty. On the third day go down quickly to the place where you hid yourself when the matter was in hand, and remain beside the stone heap.

And I will shoot three arrows to the side of it, as though I shot at a mark. And behold, I will send the boys, saying, Go, find the arrows. If I say to the boy, Look, the arrows are on this side of you, take them.

Then you are to come, for as the Lord lives, it is safe for you, and there is no danger. But if I say to the youth, Look, the arrows are beyond you, then go, for the Lord has sent you away. And as for the matter of which you and I have spoken, behold, the Lord is between you and me forever.

So David hid himself in the field, and when the new moon came, the king sat down to eat food. The king sat on his seat, as at other times, on the seat by the wall. Jonathan sat opposite, and Abner sat by Saul's side.

But David's place was empty. Yet Saul did not say anything that day, for he thought, Something has happened to him. He is not clean, surely he is not clean.

But on the second day, the day after the new moon, David's place was empty. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, Why has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today? Jonathan answered Saul, David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem. He said, Let me go, for our clan holds a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there.

So now, if I have found favour in your eyes, let me get away and see my brothers. For this reason he has not come to the king's table. Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established.

Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die. Then Jonathan answered Saul his father, Why should he be put to death? What has he done? But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him. So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death.

And Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger, and ate no food the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, because his father had disgraced him. In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him a little boy. And he said to his boy, Run, and find the arrows that I shoot.

As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. And when the boy came to the place of the arrow that Jonathan had shot, Jonathan called after the boy and said, Is not the arrow beyond you? And Jonathan called after the boy, Hurry, be quick, do not stay. So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and came to his master.

But the boy knew nothing. Only Jonathan and David knew the matter. And Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said to him, Go and carry them to the city.

And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap, and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times. And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most. Then Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring for ever.

And he rose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city. In 1 Samuel chapter 20, David inquires of Jonathan, asking what he has done wrong that Saul keeps seeking his life. Jonathan, unaware of most of the recent events, believes that Saul is still keeping his oath.

However, knowing how firm the friendship between David and Jonathan is, and remembering how Jonathan talked him out of killing David the last time, Saul has kept it

from him. David arranges a plan with Jonathan. It will smoke out Saul's intentions into the open.

At the start of the month was a new moon feast, a religious event and sacrificial meal, and David wouldn't turn up. He would leave his seat empty. When Saul inquired about his absence, Jonathan would tell his father that David had been called home to his family's yearly sacrifice.

Depending on Saul's reaction, David would either be told to return to the court or to flee for his life. David already knew that Saul had broken his oath and was trying to kill him. However, by getting Jonathan to discover the fact for himself, Jonathan would also be alerted to the true nature of the situation and to the character of his father.

Jonathan was still believing the best of Saul and prepared to countenance the possibility that Saul could take an oath in the name of the Lord and then go back on it. Jonathan speaks to David very plainly, making clear that he knows that David is the true heir of the kingdom and the one that the Lord will establish in Saul's place. He asks to form a covenant with David again.

This time the covenant is not merely with David as an individual, but with David's house after him. The relationship between David and Jonathan has changed significantly in these chapters. Where the focus was once on David being taken into the favour of Jonathan's house, now the focus is on Jonathan being taken into the favour of David's.

David had begun by asking for covenant mercy and faithfulness from Jonathan and now Jonathan asks the same of David. Jonathan devises a plan by which he can alert David of his father's intentions. David was to stay three days in the field.

The fact that all of these events occurred in a field is worth noticing perhaps. Two brothers in a field might remind us of Cain and Abel. However, unlike Cain, the older Jonathan wants to save the life of his younger brother, not to take it.

On the third day, Jonathan would shoot three arrows and depending on where he shot them, David would know whether it was safe for him to return or whether he had to flee. When Saul discovered that David had left the court and realised that Jonathan knew, he was furious with Jonathan. He refers to David as the son of Jesse, even though David is an adopted son and son-in-law in his house.

Recognising that Jonathan's loyalties lie with David, he speaks in a way that seems to disown Jonathan too, calling him the son of a whore and saying that he has shamed his mother, suggesting that he isn't prepared to own Jonathan as his son. By this point, it is clear that Jonathan has openly been playing second fiddle to David and his father has noticed. A few chapters ago, David was spoken of as if he was a wife being taken into the household of Saul, the husband and king of Israel.

Now David is being spoken of as the new husband and king of Israel and Jonathan is seeking his protection and support. Jonathan recognises himself as dependent upon a new dynasty. Even though David was a fugitive whose life was sought by the king, Jonathan recognises that the Lord is with David and that no force will ultimately prevail against him.

Saul then casts a spear at Jonathan, just as he had done with David, and once again he misses. The once great warrior Saul has missed his target on three separate occasions, while Jonathan will hit his target three times in a row later in the chapter. On the morning of the third day, Jonathan went out into the field and gave David the signal to flee from Saul.

After the boy who was gathering Jonathan's arrows had departed, David came out of his hiding place and bade an emotional farewell to Jonathan. They would only meet once more before Jonathan's death. This moment is the start of a new phase in the life of David.

He has been tested in the house of his father-in-law and will now become the leader of his own men, a group that will become the seed of a new Israel. The story of 1 Samuel is among other things a story of adopted sons taking over from natural sons. The wicked sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas are replaced by Samuel, the righteous son of Hannah.

The unfaithful sons of Samuel are replaced by Saul, whom Saul adopts as his own child. The son of Saul, Jonathan, is replaced by Saul's adopted son and son-in-law David. We see a similar theme in other parts of the Bible, most notably in Genesis where the older son is often replaced by the younger.

Abel is favoured over Cain. Isaac is favoured over Ishmael. Jacob is favoured over Esau.

Joseph is favoured over his brothers. In most of these cases we see the favoured son being hated, resisted and resented by the ones that he replaces. In such situations two sacrifices are called for and most do not want to make them.

First, fathers have to be prepared to give up their beloved sons and their ambitions for them for the sake of other sons. Isaac, for instance, wasn't prepared to make this sacrifice and insisted on blessing Esau rather than Jacob, even though God had made clear that Jacob was the true heir of the covenant. Abraham showed his willingness in first sacrificing Ishmael, sending him away, even though he dearly wanted to see the covenant established in him.

He then showed it again in being prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise. Sons also have to be prepared to sacrifice their position and prerogative and give it to one that they might think is less worthy. Esau wasn't prepared to surrender his position to Jacob.

Joseph's brothers hated him for his dreams that he would rise above them. The character of Jonathan, then, burns upon the pages of 1 Samuel as a most remarkable example of humility, spiritual insight, heroism and devotion. The nobility of Jonathan stands in the most marked contrast to his father's character.

Saul was unwilling to give up power and ambition to God's will. He was the stubborn father who would not sacrifice his son and his ambitions for Jonathan to God's will. However, when Jonathan saw that God had raised up righteous David, Jonathan acted in a way that is so far beyond the typical mode of human behaviour that it commands our attention.

When David came on the scene, he was the natural rival to Jonathan by his nature. He performed the same sort of brave acts, he received the love and the praise of the people and was successful in everything that he did. It seemed increasingly clear that God was with David and that David was going to usurp the place of Jonathan.

The natural thing for Jonathan to have done would have been to seek to kill David, just as his father was doing. However, unlike his father who resisted God's purpose, Jonathan acted against all supposed self-interest to serve it. He took David under his protection.

He freely gave up his position as crown prince to David. He risked and resisted the wrath of his father for David. He allowed himself to be dishonoured for David.

He put his life on the line for David. His greeting of David in this chapter is like the greeting Esau gave to Jacob upon his return in Genesis chapter 33 verse 4. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept. There are two Esaus in this story.

Saul is the Esau who seeks to take David's life and is envious of his blessing. But Jonathan is the Esau who is at peace with his brother. Jonathan is a powerful example for us in several respects.

We may find ourselves in a position like Jonathan's on occasions. Jonathan was the son of a wicked man but with an immense privilege of position. He was willing to give all of this position up and to put his life at risk in order to align himself with the suffering and persecuted servant of God.

Jonathan was a man who at immense personal cost changed sides. He is a man who stepped back from a position that was going to be given to him when someone more suitable appeared. He was the crown prince who resisted and deceived his father the king for the sake of a poor fugitive.

He is the man who willingly gave up his power and title into the hands of God's servant. He was the man who broke the bonds of family for the sake of the kingdom of God. This is the sacrifice that Christ calls us to make.

He calls us to love him, the son of David, over father and mother. We are called to be like Jonathan, surrendering worldly wealth, position and inheritance in order to align ourselves with the weak and persecuted people of God, believing that God's will prevails over all human power. Such a sacrifice requires the same humility that Jonathan showed, the humility that makes us willing to be shamed and vilified, to be hated and attacked, to be robbed of status, reputation and ambition, to lose the spotlight and adulation of society and even to put our own lives on the line, and to do all of this without self-pity or pride but joyfully and confidently in the light of God's good purpose.

In Jonathan we also see a shadow of a greater Jonathan to come, of one who made himself of no reputation, took on the form of a servant and humbled himself, of one who gave up his rights so that adopted sons might be saved and raised up, of one who considers shame, dishonour and persecution as light when weighed against the delight of doing God's will, of one who gave up family bonds and ambitions for the sake of the weak. As we have already seen, the book of 1 Samuel described Jonathan as being bound up with the life of David. For this reason we should not be surprised to find that the greater Jonathan is also David's greater son, this time sent by a loving father who unlike Saul did not seek to spare his own son but out of love gave him up for us all.

Much as his faith was earlier in the story, the love of Jonathan is a shining beacon in the darkness of the unfaithfulness and lovelessness of Saul's court. It is one of the strongest examples of love and devotion in the entire Old Testament. Yet we are the recipients of a love that utterly eclipses that of Jonathan for David, a love that is more ardent, more costly and more committed.

David was a one-time shepherd boy loved by the son of a king. We are sinners loved by the son of God. David was a gifted young warrior loved by a military hero.

We are frail creatures of dust loved by the one who is above all earthly powers. David was a servant of the king for whom the king's son risked his life. We were the enemies of God for whom the son of God gave his life.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the relationship between David and Jonathan supports David's claim to the throne? Romans chapter 1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed

in all the world. For 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, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, 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. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse, for although they know God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts in impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome as one who had not yet visited the city. His motives for doing so seem to be that of establishing a base for his future ministry in the Roman Church.

Most prominent in the concerns of this letter is the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the Gospel. One challenge that Paul faces is that although he has several connections in the Church in Rome, as we see in chapter 16, he wasn't its founder. He might be seen to be illegitimately inserting himself into someone else's field of labour.

John Barclay suggests that the reason why Paul takes the tact that he does is because he needs to demonstrate to the Romans that, as the apostle to the Gentiles, he is their apostle. Paul isn't just one of several apostles to the Gentiles, but he is the apostle to the Gentiles, as Peter is the lead apostle to the circumcision. The Roman Church can gain an understanding of their part within the much greater picture from him.

This is why so much of the book is devoted to the issue of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and the way that it fulfils God's purposes. As we see in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter, the Christians in Rome are predominantly believing Gentiles. Paul introduces himself as a servant or slave of Christ Jesus.

He has been called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God, which he proceeds to express in condensed form. As a slave, Paul is bound to his master and to the task that has been given to him. Although the Gospel is a gospel of freedom, Paul explores the paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom at various points in his epistles, not least in this epistle in chapter 6. He has been set apart for this purpose.

We might recall the setting apart of priests and those devoted to a sacred calling. The Gospel is in fulfilment of earlier prophetic scripture, some of which he will appeal to as the letter progresses. The term Gospel is one that draws from Old Testament prophecy, especially passages such as Isaiah 40.9 And also in Isaiah 52.7 Paul is charged with bringing the word of this Gospel, a message fulfilled in the claim that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord.

God is establishing his reign. The passages from Isaiah that speak of the Gospel are speaking about God returning to rule among his people, the signs of God coming near to Zion and that return of God to rule being a sign of judgment and deliverance and a source of joy and comfort to a once beleaguered people. For Paul, the message of the Gospel is a message concerning God's Son.

Behind this we should probably hear the words of 2 Samuel 7 verses 12-14. According to the flesh, Jesus is the descendant of David. He is the Davidic heir of the promises of the kingdom.

He was marked out as, or declared to be, the Messiah, the Davidic Son of God, in the resurrection. He was already the Messiah, of course, but it was in the resurrection that this fact was openly declared. We might recall the way that the truth of Jesus' messianic identity was a secret for much of the Gospel narrative.

Particularly in the Gospel of Mark, this is a prominent theme. It is only after the resurrection that the secret of Christ's messianic identity is shouted from the rooftops. We should also observe the spirit-flesh contrast that is going on here.

Christ's physical descent from David is important, but far more important is the fact that he bears the powerful spirit of holiness. In the resurrection the new creation of the spirit dawns, being inaugurated even in the time of the flesh. Through the resurrected Messiah and Lord, Jesus, Paul has received his commission, apostleship to the nations.

The intent of this commission is establishing the obedience of faith, the appropriate believing and willing response to the message of God's reign established in Jesus the Messiah. This calling is to be exercised among all of the nations, among whom the Romans themselves are included. Paul's typical epistle refers to the prayers that he makes for the people to whom he is writing.

We see the same pattern here. We should consider the way in which Paul's ministry of teaching and writing is accompanied by an extensive ministry of prayer. The news of the Roman Christian's believing response to the message of the Gospel has gotten around.

One can imagine the excitement for Paul of hearing that a growing community of faithful persons can now be found in the very heart of the greatest city of the empire, especially for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Meeting these Christians would have been something that he longed to do. He wants to benefit them and to play some part in what God is doing there.

Paul has a calling both to Greeks and to barbarians, to the two great divisions of Gentile humanity. He has a message for the church in Rome as the apostle to the Gentiles and is eager to share it with them. Most commentators see in verses 16 and 17 a great summary statement of Paul's Gospel message.

Paul is not ashamed of this Gospel, although it may seem to be foolishness to many. His confidence in the Gospel is and will be vindicated. None who believe in it will be put to shame.

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The power isn't merely something that accompanies the Gospel message, nor is the Gospel merely about God's power. God's power is active in the declaration of the Gospel message itself.

Through it God is forming a people for his Son by his Spirit. And this is a message to the Jew first and then also to the Greek. As we will see in this epistle, the message of Jesus

the Messiah is in the first place a message to the circumcised, but it is also a message that brings in Gentiles on an equal footing.

In the Gospels and Acts, the message of the Kingdom of God goes to Jews first and when they reject it, it goes out to the Gentiles. In the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. What exactly Paul is referring to in the expression the righteousness of God has been a matter of considerable debate.

Some have seen in this a reference to God's perfect moral standard. For many Protestants historically the expression has been interpreted as a reference to the imputed righteousness of Christ, Christ's perfect righteousness that is graciously put to our account. Although there may be some good theology underlying the concerns that drive this historic reading, I don't think these senses of the righteousness of God are what Paul is referring to in this juncture.

Rather it seems to me the righteousness of God needs to be read more in terms of the use of such terminology in the Old Testament, especially in places like the Psalms and Isaiah. There the righteousness of God is primarily his saving righteousness, his restorative setting of the world to rights in fulfilment of his gracious covenant commitment to his people, something that is achieved through judgement and salvation. For Paul this is revealed from faith, for faith or to faith.

The meaning of this expression is somewhat opaque. Some commentators have seen here a reference to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, Jesus' own faithfulness exercised towards us, producing faith in us. Again this might be true enough theologically, but I'm not quite persuaded that it is what is in view here.

I'm more inclined to see this as a reference to God's faithfulness to his promises, leading to the answering faith of those who hear the message of his salvation. This statement ends with a quotation from Habakkuk 2 verse 4. There is some ambiguity over the party whose faith is in view in the Habakkuk text, as Paul quotes it. In the Septuagint the faith is God's faithfulness.

In the original Hebrew it is probably best taken as a reference to human faith. It could be a reference to the way that in a time of difficulty the righteous believer lives by confident anticipation of God's deliverance, or to the way that they live by God's faithfulness to them. Perhaps an argument could also be made that Paul is using this in a Christological way.

Christ is the righteous one. In some respects not a very great deal is riding upon the way that we resolve such questions. In this case all of those senses resonate with something in Paul's message in this letter.

The very ambiguity of the statement presents the reader with fertile ground for

reflection upon the manifold relationships between the terms of righteousness and faith, or faithfulness. God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel message. This righteousness is revealed in the conditions of sharpest contrast with the unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth as its bleak backdrop.

The repetition of the term unrighteousness makes the opposition very clear. God's gracious righteousness is not given in response to men's righteousness but in the situation of deep unrighteousness. Indeed one of the things that is being revealed at this point in history is God's wrath against sin and against mankind's suppression of the truth.

The wrath will be revealed climactically on the last day. However it has also been revealed in the death of Christ and will be revealed again in the great judgements against Israel and the nations on the near horizon. God has revealed himself in his creation and he has done so plainly.

The knowledge that Paul speaks of need not be considered to be the sort of theoretical knowledge that we arrive at through philosophical reflection, even though these truths about God are knowable in such a manner. The attributes that are revealed are invisible, yet they are disclosed in creation. In Psalm 19 verses 1-4 the psalmist says, The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Even though we suppress it, sometimes to the point that we may not know that we know it, we all have some basic apprehension of the truth of God. We can blind ourselves to the truth and we can dull ourselves to the truth. But ultimately no one can live consistently as if God did not exist.

On some level, deep down, all of us have an apprehension of God's reality. Indeed, it is precisely on account of this sense that our need for forms of idolatry that disguise the truth is so pronounced. The appropriate response to such knowledge is to honour God and to give thanks to him.

And yet when this response is not made, the result is that hearts become darkened. Where there was once the light of revelation and knowledge, when that light is consistently rejected, people will find themselves groping in darkness. Presumed wisdom actually led to folly.

Perhaps there is an allusion back to the story of the Garden of Eden here, where grasping for wisdom in sin led to shame and folly. Also to Psalm 106 verses 19-22, they made a calf in Horeb and worshipped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God

for the image of an ox that eats grass.

They forgot God, their saviour, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Idolatry, which replaces the otherness of God with our own creations and projections, is the fundamental sin. The result of this dishonouring of God is the poetic justice of human beings dishonouring their own bodies.

The honour of the body is an important theme in scripture. However, where God is lost sight of in practical atheism, dishonouring of the body is the result. If rejecting the light of the knowledge of God leads to hearts being darkened, the rejection of the holiness of God leads to the dishonouring of our bodies.

There was a direct exchange of the truth for the lie, and of God for a counterfeit. Paul here presents homosexual passions and relations as a paradigmatic result of the breakdown of man's dignity after his rejection of God. God gave them up to such things.

Once the restraints are removed, sin can take control over people. In cultures that reject God, sexual licence can take on the character of a sort of perverse anti-religion. In place of the dignifying knowledge of God comes promiscuous and unbounded sexuality that dishonours the body, imprisoning it to its lusts.

Homosexual passions and relations, for Paul, break down one of the most fundamental features of humanity made in the image of God, that we are male and female. The poetic justice that Paul sees in this should be recognised. If we reject the transcendent otherness of God, the otherness of the other sex will be rejected too.

And where humanity was once called to be fruitful and multiply and to exercise dominion, it can turn in on itself in fruitlessness and sterility under the cruel dominion of its lusts. Paul sees this as a shameful degradation of humanity. Paul then points to a structure to same-sex relations and passions that is degrading of humanity.

Paul is not talking about quite the same thing as we do when we speak of homosexuality in LGB persons. However, there is quite clearly considerable overlap, as the Church has recognised throughout its history. We should beware of over-individualising Paul's teaching here though, as if he were saying that persons with homosexual desires are peculiarly sinful.

His argument is more about human society as a whole. While Paul singles out homosexual desires and relations as paradigmatic of what a society is given up to when it devotes itself to self-love under the mask of its own idolatrous creations and projections, persons who have but resist such desires are not given up to such a sexual culture in the way that Paul is speaking of here. We might draw comparisons with the sin of suicide.

Suicide as self-murder could appropriately be seen as a profoundly paradigmatic sin. It is a striking out at the image of God in ourselves. However, people who commit suicide, while they are committing something incredibly serious, are very, very seldom committing suicide as an intentional performance of that paradigmatic sin.

Rather, they may be acting out of the deepest depths of despair, out of extreme irrational impulse, or in response to unbearable pain. While recognising just how serious the sin of suicide is, considered in itself, we should consider with compassion and understanding the reasons why people might commit it, and recognise how unwitting or unintended they might be, nor should we consider them sinful beyond all other persons. I believe the same applies to persons with homosexual desires.

Here the social character of God's giving up of people to sin should be focused upon. A society that has been given over will start to give itself over to self-destruction and self-degradation. An entire sexual culture will develop around the practice and approval of homosexual relations and desires.

Such a society ends up courting death. It loses sight of the fruitfulness and the joy and the otherness of humanity created as male and female in the image of God. And as it loses sight of God, it will become more and more imprisoned to its own lusts.

In Paul's understanding, for such a society the penalty for sin is found in the degradation of the sin itself. If people don't see fit to acknowledge God, God will give them up to an unfit mind to do things that are inappropriate. Once again the punishment fits the sin, and God's giving up of people is not something imposed upon them from without, rather it is more a matter of God removing the restraints and allowing the sin to go where it naturally goes, taking the sinners with it.

When people reject God, Paul is arguing, they end up degrading themselves. Their own humanity becomes misshapen and distorted in tragic ways. And this is fertile ground for every form of sin and vice.

Such sins and vices fill people up and take possession of them and control of them. Paul lists a large number of these dehumanising vices, concluding with senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Now, not every person or society will express these vices in equal measure or in equal proportions.

However, these are all the sorts of demons that will possess those societies that reject God. Such persons know deep down that what they are doing is dishonouring to God and also to themselves, that those who give themselves over to these things have treated God's gift of life with scorn, and that death is the appropriate sanction for those who have rebelled against the giver of life. Many such persons will be consumed by the destructive tendencies of their own self-hatred, eating themselves up within themselves.

However, as if it were not enough to do such acts, they will go out of their way to approve such sins and vices and to form societies in which evil is increasingly called good. A question to consider. How does Paul's description of the problem here give us indications of the shape that an appropriate solution must take?