

Who's Who in Rome

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of March 2002.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Who's Who in Rome and is based on Romans chapter 16 verses 1 to 27.

You may like to have the Bibles open on page 925, the black Bibles that are in front of you. And for those who've been at Holy Trinity a while, this is sermon number 25 in Romans, the last one.

So you've done very well to get this far. And it's a bit of a relief to get to the end. But let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this letter and these words that we're looking at today in chapter 16.

We pray that you'll write them on our hearts. Help us to live lives of obedient faith for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I quite like watching the credits at the end of a film, although sometimes they do tend to go on a bit, almost as long as the film.

[1 : 21] It seems that every man and his dog and his boy and daughter and everyone gets a mention. And they all have titles that are a bit confusing, the best boy and the grip and things like that.

You wonder what on earth they have to do to get themselves in the list of credits at the end of a film. Now, the other night, I must confess, I watched Neighbours. And I also watched the credits at the end of Neighbours.

And I must say, the reason for watching Neighbours was because our church was featured on it. They had a baptism of a baby of some of the characters. But I wanted to watch the credits to make sure that our church got mentioned by name, which was part of the agreement we had with Grundy's television.

And sure enough, there in the credits, right near the end, in very small type, Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Doncaster. Romans 16 is a bit like the credits.

You've gone through 15 chapters of Romans, the main letter, if you like. And now, finally, we come to the credits. But don't leave the theatre before the end of this chapter because there is much for us of benefit here.

[2 : 29] There's a list of names that Rose read so well for us, names that are hard to pronounce, names that most of us are totally unfamiliar with. Some of them are unknown, entirely apart from their name being mentioned in this list here.

In chapter 16. What at least it does to us is tell us that individuals matter for God. Here is Paul mentioning individual, unknown, almost unseen Christian people.

But they matter. And they matter to Paul and they matter to God. It's not just the great heroes like St. Paul, the great leaders and missionaries of the church. But here are, if you like, normal parishioners of churches in the ancient world who matter and are important and whose names are mentioned.

Many of them are no doubt quietly labouring in love for the Lord for a long time. In some senses, this section is like a little peek behind the scenes at what's going on in the ancient church.

Just like those television programs that show you how a film was made and take you behind the scenes, behind the set to meet the characters and see the stunt people and so on.

[3 : 43] Not that these are stuntmen, but it's taking us behind the scenes of the early church, getting us a little bit of a feel for everyday life in the early church.

For example, there's Phoebe. She's the first one who's mentioned. Her name is a Greek name. It probably means that she wasn't Jewish. No Jew would name their daughter Phoebe. It was, after all, one of the Greek gods.

So she's come from a Gentile or Greek family. At some point, she's become a Christian. We don't know when. But she is a wealthy person. She's described as a benefactor, somebody who would provide hospitality for St. Paul and others, but somebody who would provide money to support the ministry and the mission of the church in the ancient world.

Perhaps she was a businesswoman, a tradesperson. But she's the person who's taking this letter that Paul wrote in Corinth, which is southern Greece today, on the Peloponnese, across to Rome.

It may well be that she was already traveling there on business. And so knowing that, it prompted Paul to write the letter, to entrust it to her, to take on to the church in Rome.

[4 : 55] We're told that she was a deacon in the church. In particular, she was a deacon in the church at Cancra. Cancra was the port for the city of Corinth.

Corinth lies on the Peloponnese, which is a great big blob off Greece. But there's a very thin isthmus between this, it, and the mainland where Athens is. So Cancra's on one side, and often ships and cargo would be hauled overland, before the canal that's there today was built, to aid shipping, so you didn't have to go all the way around the Peloponnese.

She's a deacon at the church at Cancra, near Corinth. Probably that means an official office in the church. Probably not its leader, but certainly a high official in the church.

This woman of the early church. Paul's words about her form a sort of mini reference. She's unknown, it seems, in Rome, so he commends her to the Roman church and says, look after her.

So he says in verses 1 and 2, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, sister in the Christian sense, because she belongs within the Christian family, a deacon of the church at Cancra, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, to help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

[6 : 18] So she's the first person mentioned and she's the bearer of the letter. What follows in the next few verses is a list of greetings from Paul who's in Corinth to various Christians in Rome.

Paul's never been to Rome at this point. Some of the Christians in Rome he wouldn't know and maybe even some that he mentions by name he's not met, but many he would have because of the travel that people did and his path would have crossed with some of them at different points.

Some of these people are not known to us apart from their name here, though others are. The first two that are mentioned, Prisca and Aquila, are known to us from a few references elsewhere in the New Testament.

Unlike Phoebe, these are Jewish Christians. They've been brought up as Jews, been converted to Christ at some point. And we know from other references about them in the New Testament that they were in Rome 10 years or so before this letter was written.

But they were expelled from Rome when the Emperor Claudius in 49 AD expelled Christians and Jews from Rome because of riots. And so they went to Corinth where they first met Paul.

[7 : 30] And then from there they were with him in Ephesus as part of his ministry there. Now they're back in Rome because he's sending greetings to them. But we know that later on they go back again to Ephesus because that's where they are when Paul writes his final letter to Timothy.

Paul says about them, greet Prisca or Priscilla and Aquila who work with me in Christ Jesus and who risked their necks for my life. We don't know when that was.

But certainly in Ephesus where they were with him there were great riots that threatened Paul's life. And he was rescued from the amphitheater there and fled from Ephesus. And to whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Greet also, he says in verse 5, the church in their house. They were wealthy people therefore they owned a house that was big enough to house a church.

Now we must remember that in the ancient world in which Paul writes there were no church buildings like ours. The Roman Empire was pagan. The first emperor to be converted was Constantine in 311 AD.

[8 : 40] So for nearly 300 years there were no Christian church buildings pretty much as we know it today. Churches would meet in people's houses. There's some debate about how big they could have been but most likely they're around the number of 50.

And in these greetings here from Paul to the church in Rome we get a sense that the church in Rome is not one house church but several house churches. So in verse 14 he says, Greet Asyncretus, Phlegon, Hermes, Petrobus, Hermes and the brothers and sisters who are with them.

And some suggest that that probably refers to one house church. The same in the next verse 15. A list of people's names and all the saints who are with them. And some suggest that earlier on when it talks about the family of Aristobulus in verse 10 the family of Narcissus in verse 11 that maybe they too are not talking about physical families but actually a house church that meets under their patronage and in their house.

Another feature to note in these greetings is the great affection that Paul expresses. It's not a standard list of formal greetings. Greet this person and that person.

He says in the end of verse 5 Greet my beloved Eponetus. There's real affection in that word beloved. There must have been a special friendship and fellowship between Paul and this man Eponetus who was after all the first convert in Asia for Christ.

[10 : 11] Asia is not then as we know it today China and India and Japan and so on. Asia then was a province of the Roman Empire which was in what we now see as western Turkey.

And its chief city was Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. Paul was there for some period of time and Eponetus is the first person converted in that territory.

Still now a Christian some years later now for some reason he's in Rome no longer in Ephesus or in Asia. But it's not only he who is beloved. Later on in verse 8 and Plaitis is my beloved in the Lord.

In the next verse my beloved Stachys give greetings to him. Later on at the end of verse 12 greet the beloved Persis a Persian woman probably with a name like that.

So there's a number of people whom Paul personally knows and has particular affection for that he greets. There is also in these greetings a recognition of hard work and hard labour.

[11 : 16] Verse 6 Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you. We don't know what she did but it's referring to a person who's a normal member of the church who has worked hard within the context and fellowship of the church in Rome.

Later in the list in verse 12 greet those workers in the Lord. That may not suggest somebody who's got an official job in the church but maybe just lay people who particularly have worked hard in Christian ministry.

Two women are mentioned Tryphena and Tryphosa and then Persis at the end of verse 12 has also worked hard in the Lord. Reminds us that every church needs hard workers.

Is it coincidence that all these people are women who work hard in the church? But often they're the unsung heroes the people behind the scenes who labour hard.

Often today when we talk about somebody who particularly works hard we'll say oh Fred or Mary they work very hard for the church. But that's not what Paul says of these people.

[12 : 23] These are people who work hard in the Lord. That is the motivation for working hard is not to serve the church per se but to serve the Lord.

Now that may well of course mean hard work within the fellowship of the church. But the primary motivation is working hard in the Lord. It's the Lord's work that we do.

And we do it for his recognition not human recognition or human thanks. The Lord is the one whom we are to labour hard for.

And that little expression who work hard in the Lord reminds us and should re-energise us in our own hard work in Christian fellowship often unthanked but we are serving the Lord.

Another of the features of this list is the number of women who are mentioned. Of the 26 names nine at least are women. And clearly many women exercise great ministry.

[13 : 23] Phoebe we've mentioned as the one who was the deacon who carried this letter from Corinth to Rome. Priscilla we've already mentioned. She's actually named every time in the New Testament a head of her husband which may reflect her seniority or her Christian commitment or her wealth.

We're not quite sure why she's listed first. But there's also Mary, Trifosa, Trifena, Persis, Julia, Rufus' mother, Nereus' sister. A whole list of women whom Paul particularly greets.

One of the most interesting of the women is the one called Junia who's mentioned with presumably her husband Andronicus in verse 7. Greet Andronicus and Junia.

They're called Paul's relatives but literally the word is kinsfolk and that probably means that they are Jewish Christians as Paul was a Jewish Christian. They're not Greek or Gentile in background.

Paul says that they were in prison with me. Paul was in prison a number of times. We're not sure which of the occasions he was in prison with them. Clearly they like he has been brought out of prison and they have gone on to Rome because Paul was not in Rome to this point at least when he wrote this letter.

[14 : 37] But presumably they were in prison like Paul for the Christian faith. These were people who were not bad people thrown into prison for fraud or some sort of immorality but Paul's spells in prison were always because of his preaching of the gospel.

And so presumably they too were in prison with him for the same reason. But perhaps the most intriguing thing about them is the description at the end of verse 7.

They are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before I was. Sometimes the word apostle means one of the 12 disciples of Jesus or followers of Jesus or the 11 after Judas' betrayal.

But sometimes the word apostle is broader than that. Paul is an apostle, Barnabas the same, James the same, they were not part of the 12 disciples. And probably what qualified somebody to be an apostle is that they were a witness of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

So after his resurrection he appeared to the 11 in the upper room but also to other people. We know, for example, that he appeared to 500 at one time in the days before he ascended to heaven after the first Easter day.

[15 : 56] Well here, presumably, Andronicus and Junior are part of those group of people who have seen Jesus risen from the dead. They're an apostle, a witness, and called then to proclaim the resurrection.

And it also fits with the very end of the verse. They were in Christ, Paul says, before I was. That is, they were Christians before me. Now Paul became a Christian remarkably on the road to Damascus as he was setting off to pursue and persecute Christian people.

That occurred about a year after the resurrection of Jesus. Give or take a bit, probably. So they were Christians within the first year, Andronicus and Junior that is, within the first year of the resurrection.

And therefore, most likely, they were people who were witnesses of Jesus after he rose from the dead. That occurred in 30 or 33 AD are the most commonly named dates.

This letter is written 57 or 58. They've been Christians for perhaps 25 years. They saw Jesus risen, converted to faith in him, and now 25 years later, they are still prominent among the apostles.

[17 : 08] They may well have been in the church in Rome, Christians longer than anybody else in the church in Rome. And Paul sends greetings to them. Notice too, that a woman is an apostle, one of the most highly regarded officers of the ancient church, one that in one sense would die out, as the witnesses of the resurrection gradually did die out.

Here is a woman highly regarded as an apostle in the early church. Another feature of this list is its great diversity. We see here men and women.

We see here wealthy Jewish Christians like Priscilla and Aquila. We see wealthy Gentile Christians like Phoebe. Some suggest that Aristobulus, who perhaps hosts a house church, he would be wealthy, maybe the same for Narcissus as well.

We see here possibly some slaves or ex-slaves. The names are Banus in verse 9, Ampliatus in verse 8. They're names that seem to be used in the slave levels of society rather than the upper echelons of society.

Some of these people may well have had royal connections. A person called Herodian is mentioned in verse 11. That's clearly a Jewish person.

[18 : 29] It may be somebody who is associated by marriage or by bloodline with Herod the Great, who had died well and truly many years before this, but whose line lived on through various family members.

Maybe there's royal connections there. The same, some suggest, with Aristobulus, because Herod the Great had a grandson, Aristobulus, and some suggest that it may be the same person, though there's no proof of that.

We've got men and women, we've got wealthy, poor, slaves, Jews, Gentiles. It's a real mix of people. And many of those that Paul is greeting have travelled from other places.

They're not native Romans, perhaps. So they're probably from Asia, maybe from Jerusalem, Palestine, who knows. But what we get here is a mix of the church, which is what it's meant to be.

Paul has been arguing that in the pages before this chapter, arguing for love, for harmony, for unity, for concessions to be made to sustain Christian unity in the church, primarily Jew-Gentile bridging that gap.

- [19 : 34] But also here we see a church that is Jew and Gentile together, rich and poor together, male and female together, a really healthy cosmopolitan multicultural mix. Well, it is what the church is meant to be.

And it will certainly be what the people of God are like in heaven, where people of every tongue and tribe and race and background will be gathered together in perfect unity around the throne of God to sing his praise.

Well, for all these greetings, Paul is not indiscriminate with whom he greets. He says in verse 16, greet one another with a holy kiss.

But when he says one another, he doesn't mean you Roman Christians go out and just kiss everybody in the street. Greet one another implies within Christian fellowship.

You Christians greet other Christians with a holy kiss. Whoever those other Christians are, you are to be in love and harmony and unity with them. There is no place for fractured relationships within the Christian church.

- [20 : 39] But he then goes on to say in verse 17 about people who preach another gospel, avoid them. Very clear, very bold. Have nothing to do with them.

So greet one another within Christian fellowship with a holy kiss, but have nothing to do with the heretics who are preaching false gospels outside the church. He says at the beginning of verse 17, I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses.

And he's talking about false teachers. There are three things about these false teachers that may well be useful tests for us when we hear people preaching what they claim to be spiritual truth.

These false teachers, Paul firstly says, are, in verse 17, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned. That is, what they preach is inconsistent with the gospel that's being preached as we haven't recorded in the New Testament.

For us, it's not so much what we've learned verbally so much as presented here to us in the words of scripture, the gospel. So the first test of any heretic, or anyone who's preaching truth for that matter, is, is it consistent with scripture or not?

- [21 : 56] And if it's not, Paul says, avoid them. The second criterion by which we can assess teaching, spiritual teaching, whether it's true or not, is, who is the preacher, teacher serving?

He says in verse 18, for such people do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites. That is, is a preacher, teacher serving him or herself, or really Christ?

That may require some discernment. May well be that false teachers are trying to teach in the name of Christ, and trying to deceive people to say that they're serving Christ. We need to be careful to discern what is true there.

Maybe these people claim to be Christian, but they're in fact not. Certainly their words are persuasive and deceitful, and they need to be assessed with wisdom.

The third test is a moral test. Is what they promote good or evil? Paul says in verse 19, for while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil.

- [23 : 12] And in the context of what he's talking about these false teachers, he's saying you've got to assess whether what they promote is in the end moral, good, or not. Shun what is evil, be guileless about it, have nothing to do with it, and be wise and practice what is good.

See, so often heresy is accompanied by immorality. So they go together. That's why right teaching and right theology is essential for undergirding godly behaviour.

So here are some tests for us, as well as for the Roman Christians about false teachers. Are they teaching the truth consistent with scripture? Are they serving Christ or themselves?

Are they promoting goodness or not? Paul offers a promise about these false teachers at the end of this section.

He says in verse 20, the God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. God will do that, not you have to do it. Now, Satan's already been defeated in the cross of Christ.

[24 : 18] Jesus' death and resurrection has defeated Satan and evil and death. But Satan has not yet conceded defeat. It's a bit like the recent South Australian elections.

The premier was defeated in the election but refused to concede defeat, at least until after he shook the hand of the queen. Satan's been defeated by Jesus' death, but he's refused to concede defeat.

And so the final defeat will happen when Jesus returns. That's what Paul's referring to in verse 20. God will shortly crush Satan under your feet. That is when Jesus returns.

Yes, you may face many threats of false teaching now, but finally know for sure that such false teaching and its source, which is Satan, will finally be put out and extinguished forever.

The words about crushing Satan under your feet remind us perhaps of the very beginning of the Bible where the serpent in the Garden of Eden had tempted Adam and Eve to sin.

[25 : 24] They sinned and in response God cursed the serpent. And he said to the serpent that the offspring of the woman will crush your head. And here perhaps Paul is deliberately alluding to that threat and saying that in Jesus Christ those words are fulfilled.

That finally when Jesus returns, Satan will be crushed under his feet once and for all. It's worth pausing here to consider this threat of false teaching.

If the true gospel is so good as Paul has expounded for 15 chapters that it is, why would people be vulnerable to going astray to a false gospel?

And I think the answer comes in the little words at the end of verse 18. These false teachers propagate their false teaching by smooth talk and flattery and deception.

you see they flatter. People say flattery gets you nowhere but it does. You see flattery is what itching ears long to hear.

[26 : 38] Flattery is what pride yearns for. Flattery always wins followers because people like to be told that they're better than they are, that they're worth more than they are.

Flattery glorifies people. And so it will always attract a following. But the greatest theme of this letter to the Romans is that all glory goes to God not to human beings.

The gospel is about ultimately bringing the greatest glory to God. And this glorious gospel does not flatter us. If you recall chapters 1 to 3, they are painful chapters to hear.

We have sinned. We have failed. All of us without exception or exemption. We have no excuse. That is far from flattering us.

It is the painful truth. But the gospel goes on to tell us that salvation is entirely the work of God's grace.

[27 : 46] for us it is undeserved, unmerited and unearned. Jesus died for us not when we were good, that's flattery, but when we were weak, helpless, God's enemies and sinners.

That's why Paul says at the end of verse 20, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. You see the gospel may not flatter me but it does save me.

The gospel is God's power to save us. Flattery has no power to save. Self-help gospels will not save me. Gospels that tell me that I'm better than I am, they will not save me.

Smooth, deceptive talk will not save me. But God and God alone saves me in Jesus Christ. Christ. And that's why at the end of this letter Paul finishes with a doxology of praise to God.

He mentions some of the people who are with him in Corinth including a man called Tertius who is actually writing the letter that Paul dictates. But then he comes in verse 25 to the climax of this letter.

[28 : 58] His praise to God. Now to God he says who is able to strengthen you. Because only God can strengthen you. No false gods can strengthen you.

No flattery can strengthen you. But only God. Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Because no other gospel will save you and strengthen you.

Only the gospel that Paul has preached and expounded in these chapters of Romans. According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles.

It's only that gospel, the gospel that has got its seeds hidden in the Old Testament but revealed in Jesus Christ now proclaimed by Paul. It is only that gospel that has power to strengthen and to save according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith.

No other gospel brings about the obedience of faith. All other gospels confuse morality and truth in the end. But it is only the gospel that Paul has preached that the New Testament testifies to and expounds for us.

[30 : 09] It is only that gospel that has the power to save us and bring us to the obedience of faith. So Paul concludes, to the only wise God through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever.

To the only wise God, he says, all credit belongs to God alone. Not to ourselves, that's flattery and futile. all glory, all praise belongs to God alone.

There's no place for boasting, for flattery, for self-glorification. And God's glory comes through Jesus Christ. Not just because God is God, but in particular because of what he has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who died on the cross to pay for the penalty of our sin, the one who died on the cross to take away God's anger for us as a propitiation.

The one who died on the cross to prove God's love for us, a love that will endure for eternity and will never let us go. We may have exchanged God's glory for idols and lies as chapter 1 tells us.

We may consistently fall short of his glory as chapter 3 tells us. But chapter 5 has told us that Jesus enables us to boast in the hope of sharing in God's glory. And in the end then, all glory is God's and not ours.

[31 : 35] See, the glory of human beings is fleeting and forgettable. How long does the glory of an AFL captain last? How long does the glory of a pop star last?

Or a fashion star last? Or a political victory last? But God's glory, Paul says, here is forever. Never fading, never perishing, never dying.

Ten thousand days will not diminish the time left for God's glory, nor will ten thousand days diminish the shine of God's glory in eternity. And so at the end of this wonderful letter of the gospel of God, a gospel that brings all glory to God, we can but say with Paul at the end, Amen.

That is, it's true. We adhere to it. We assent to it. We give God the glory. We offer him glory with our words of praise, but more importantly, we offer him glory with our lives lived as living sacrifices to him, acceptable to him, holy to him, transformed by the gospel, acceptable in Christ.

And we look forward to and we await the day when we will join the heavenly chorus, including all these people named in this chapter, when gathered around God's throne, we'll sing with the angels and the saints, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

[33 : 06] And we can but now say Amen.