

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

PAUL'S LAMENT AND HOPE

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Bruce K. Modahl

1I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. 2God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 29for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. 32For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

DIAGNOSIS: Has God Rejected His People?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Anguish

Paul travels a difficult route beginning in chapter 9 to the destination at 11:25-36. In anguish for his people he assumes the prophet's role. His words in 9:2-3 remind me of Jeremiah's plea: "O that my head were a spring of waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people." Paul goes even further wishing himself "accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people."

The Jewish people in large part rejected the gospel. This is the presenting problem.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Boasting

The deeper problem is that Paul's own people sought to establish their righteousness by works and so rejected the righteousness established by God through Christ (9:32; 10:3-4). While Jews might boast of their works, Gentile believers boasted they were grafted into God's tree of life at the expense of the Jews, branches broken off because of their unbelief (11:17-20). Such boasting implies salvation is not God's gift. Rather one is grafted in on the basis of merit.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Unreliable Promise

Most insidious, such boasting implies God's promise is not reliable. If that is the case, as Paul warns, "If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you" (11:21). [Author's Note: I realize the NRSV says, "perhaps he will not spare you." I see no lexical reason to translate *oude* as "perhaps not." Even so, I don't need a promise from God that rests on a perhaps. I need a promise in a simple declarative sentence, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly."

PROGNOSIS: Crossing from Anguish to Doxology

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Promise Sure and a Mystery

God's promise is certain. God has not rejected his people. If Christ died for the ungodly, then Christ died for all. And when Christ rose from the grave it was for all. Paul is evidence of that. As there was a remnant of faithful Israel in Elijah's time, so is Paul a member of a faithful remnant in his own time, a remnant of Israel chosen by grace (11:2b-5).

Paul explains this mystery: Like a prophet of old, Paul lifts his vision to the Day of the Lord. On that day, all the nations of the earth will gather before God. The hardening that came

upon Israel pushed the Gospel proclamation out to the Gentiles. When the full number of the Gentiles has come in all Israel will be saved (11:25). Paul summarizes for his Gentile readers: The gifts and calling of God to his Jewish people are irrevocable. You Gentiles have received mercy because of their disobedience. By the mercy shown to you they may now receive mercy (11:29-31).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Confession

Paul counters boasting, and crosses it out, by his call for confession of faith, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). When boasting and/or its attendant despair occupy us we cross them out by confession of faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Doxology

Paul's doxology in 11:33-36 crosses out his anguish. Doxology is not something we can keep to ourselves and call doxology. We give voice to our praise of the God who in Jesus is faithful to his promise. After we have worn ourselves out trying to understand and explain difficult things, in the midst of our anguish over present circumstances, and when we are worn down by our own inadequacy we break out in doxology. Such doxology is a balm to troubled consciences. It gives courage when ours falters. Doxology is a blessed assurance. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (11:36).