

Romans 1.1-25: a targum in the face of economic collapse (amongst other things)

Paul, a slave of Jesus the Messiah, called to a ministry of authority in a world that is suspicious of all authority, set apart in a world that attempts to construct a bland consumerist sameness, proclaimer of nothing less than the gospel God, the good news of God's radical kingdom.

This gospel, this kingdom proclamation, is nothing new. It was promised by the Hebrew prophets and it is the news of Jesus – the Son of God. This Jesus is a blood descendent of the infamous King David but was pronounced to be God's Son by the explosive power of the Spirit of all that is pure, all that is deeply right, when he rose from the dead. He isn't the Son of God because he was elected, or because he has the most economic power, or because he commands great armies. No, he is the Son of God because he blew apart the power of death. This is Jesus the Messiah. This is Jesus who I dare to call my Master. It is through this Jesus, the Messianic Master, that I have met a grace that makes beauty out of ugly things, the deepest of all gifts. And it is through this gift of grace that I have received my call to proclaim his good news in order to bring about faithful obedience amongst all people. I do this subject to his name. If I am to be branded, then let me be branded with the name of Jesus. He is my Master, not some corporate logo. And I do this inviting others to bear the brand of Jesus, including you, my friends, who are happy to be known as belonging to Jesus.

To all of you who live in the empire of global capitalism, to you who live at the very heart of that empire and are called out to be an alternative people: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ. Grace and peace. You won't have one without the other, and both are on offer from Jesus.

I am so thankful for all of you. You see, while the CNN gospel that is proclaimed throughout the whole world tends to be about the exploits of the empire, there is another news that comes from the heart of the empire. The news of your faithfulness has been proclaimed throughout the world. Your commitment to the poorest of the poor who live within walking distance of the corridors of power, your courage in standing up against the injustice of fair trade agreements that serve the rich and exploit the poor, your audacity in praying on the steps of the hill where the political leaders hatch their conspiracies – all of this is liberatingly good news, and it filters out to the very furthest reaches of the empire. And I have also heard the subversive news that you educate your children to be subjects of the Kingdom and not captivated slaves of the empire.

I tell you that the God whom I serve in announcing the liberating good news of his Son, bears witness to my constant prayers for you all. And what I pray is that I might actually get through the homeland security wall in order to get to you. The longer I have been delayed and blocked from coming to you, the more severe has the ache in my heart become. What I want is to come and bring you a measure of grace that will give you the strength to go on against all the odds. But to be honest, I'm looking for some encouragement too, and I am sure that I will find it in the midst of your alternative discipleship and educational community.

You know, my friends, I've been trying to come to you for years now so that I could join in the revolution that you are a part of. This irresistible revolution of Jesus is breaking out everywhere, and I want to help it happen at the heart of the empire. But there have been obstacles along the way. Sometimes other urgent ministries came up, and sometimes (as you know) the authorities have blocked my way. But here's the thing. I will not play by the rules of the empire. I will not go along with their racial profiling, their immoral surveillance tools, their demonization of any and all who would dare to not fit, who would dare question the inherent goodness of the empire and the story of progress that it proclaims. Because I follow Jesus and proclaim his good news of redemptive love, I am obligated, indeed I am indebted to both Americans and Iraqis, to Canadian troops and to the Taliban, to Jews and Palestinians, to straight and gay, to wealthy and impoverished, to the educated elite and the illiterate poor, to those who fit and to those who don't. And because I am indebted to all, including those most excluded, shameful and despised, I am incredibly eager to come to you at the very heart of an exclusionary empire, to proclaim the embracing good news of Jesus.

And here's the kicker, friends. I will not be ashamed of this gospel. I refuse to be ashamed of this gospel because I will not submit myself to the empire's categories of shame. I will not be ashamed of this gospel, even when it is perverted and employed for shameful purposes by those who would make Christian faith the handmaiden of the empire.

I may be ashamed when the name of Jesus is invoked to baptize ideologies of national security.

I may be ashamed when Christian faith takes on such a narrowly mean spirit when it comes to youth crime and drug addiction.

I may be ashamed when governor Palin invokes the name of Jesus to justify a war in Iraq that was based upon lies and deception.

I may be ashamed and embarrassed when Senator Obama confuses the promise of America with the hope that Scripture tells us to hold fast to.

And I am deeply ashamed when consumerism and greed is embraced in the name of a gospel of abundance that wears a thick veneer of Christian spirituality.

These are all shameful gospels, but I will not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I will not be ashamed of this gospel because it is nothing less than the power of God that can blow apart the empire as it brings salvation – real salvation, not the cheap consumerist salvation of the empire; real salvation, not the salvation for democracy that is imposed by the empire’s military force; real salvation, not human centred imitation that is proclaimed in the empire’s stories and symbols – it is the salvation of God for everyone who is faithful to its call, to the Jews who brought us Jesus first, and then to the non-Jews.

Why am I not ashamed of this gospel? Because in this good news about Jesus we meet the righteousness of God. The world is put to rights when the restorative justice of God is revealed. You want an ‘infinite justice’? Then don’t look to the violent justice of the empire, but turn to the justice of God manifest in Jesus tortured in a Baghdad prison, executed by imperial forces. In this gospel we meet an Operation Infinite Justice that realizes its goal by non-violently resisting the empire precisely through the Messiah subjecting himself to the violence of the empire ... unto death. The good news of Jesus has an empire-overturning power precisely because in Jesus the embracing and forgiving power of God is revealed. And it is revealed through God’s faithfulness in Jesus Christ that calls forth our faithfulness as subjects of his coming kingdom. That is why, in the shadow of an earlier empire, the prophet Habakkuk wrote that, “the one who will be righteous will live by faith ... the one who will embody justice will live by faith.”

Righteousness, justice, faithfulness – all in the shadow of empire. This is the fruit of the gospel that I long to proclaim in your midst.

So let’s be clear about what is going on these days.

Let’s not engage in cover up with talk of market corrections, or market misbehaviour.

Let’s not try to salvage this leaky ship of fools with 700 billion dollars of tax payers’ money.

No, my friends, that’s way too cheap, and doesn’t begin to address the problem.

What's going on here is nothing less than the wrath of God being revealed against all ungodliness, all injustice, all greed, all false gospels and the distorted lives they engender.

An empire of deceit, an economy of lies is no surprise when we have become so adept at suppressing the truth of God that is plain from the very nature of creation.

What part of the finite and gift character of creation didn't they get when they adopted an ideology of infinite greed, insatiable consumption and an ever expanding and ever growing economy?

Doesn't the very nature of creation bear witness to a God of abundance rooted in justice?

Doesn't the very goodness of creation bear witness to the generosity of this God, and that we can only image this God through loving and careful stewardship?

So here's the sad truth, my friends.

This empire of greed, this narrative of economic growth, this whole house of cards is based on lies and deception.

This whole culture of consumption, this whole empire of money, is based on self-willed ignorance.

Creation proclaims a better way because creation bears witness to a God of grace, but we have suppressed this truth, engaged in denial and cover-up.

Refusing to live a life of gratitude, refusing to live a life of thanks to the God who called forth such a rich creation, refusing to honour this Creator God, and embracing a culture of entitlement and ingratitude, we abandoned the God of light and embraced the dark.

And in all of our complex theories

in all of our sophisticated and incomprehensible economic talk,

in all of our high sounding rhetoric on the campaign trail,

we became futile in our thinking

we ended up with lots of talk but no sense,

theories that are empty,

vanity of vanities.

And we thought that we were so wise,

we thought that we had it all figured out,

but the joke has been on us,

and it is now clear that we have been fools.

That's what happens when you get in bed with idols,
that's what happens when you don't image God in faithful justice,
but embrace graven images,
 cheap imitations,
 that look so good,
 look so powerful,
 but will always fail you,
 will always come up short
 because they are impotent.

Empty idols, empty minds.
Dumb idols, lives of foolishness.
Betrayal and disappointment.
Fear and terror.

Embrace the idol of economism,
 believe its false promises of abundance,
 allow your lives to be shaped by the greed of this idol,
and you will reap the bankruptcy of that false faith,
 you'll be "hooked on avarice"
 you'll be caught up in an idolatry of ideology,
and your life will be reshaped in the image of that pitiful idol.

Embrace the idol of economism,
 believe its false promises of wealth and power
and you will find yourself facing "No Options"
 you will find your life constricted and bound
 you will find your life stuck in a moment that you can't get out of
and the economic freedom that you dreamed of will awaken to the reality
 of lost value,
 international terrorism
 and a despoiled planet.

And God says, "to hell with you."
And God says, "make your bed and lie in it."
And God says, "go ahead and screw your idols"
And God says, "I'll let those idols screw you right back."

My friends, we are not facing an economic crisis.
We are facing a spiritual crisis.
The issue isn't fundamentally the markets.
The issue is idolatry at the very root and foundation of our society,

at the very root and foundation of our very way of life,
at the very root and foundation of our very souls.

We are called to live in the truth,
we are called to raise children in the truth
we are called to embody truth in our lives,
but we have traded in the truth for a lie.

Our imaginations have been taken captive,
we can hardly dream of what life outside of the grip of idolatry would
look like
we can scarcely imagine a life that isn't enslaved to consumption
we can't even begin to get our heads around justice and righteousness
generosity and contentment are alien to us
an economics of enough is impossible to conceive,
let alone live.

And our children all suffer in this devil's bargain
our children are offered up as sacrifices to these false gods,
our children learn their lessons but are captivated by the foolishness of
our times
we are raising children for calamity
not for righteousness
we are raising little consumers, little 'shoppers-in-training'
not children with an audacious vision of justice
we are raising pious Christian kids
not radical disciples of the Lord Jesus
and it is all so empty,
it is all so foolish
it is all so senseless

We have got into bed with idols,
and not known the Lord.
We have bent the knee to idolatry
and not worshipped the Creator
who is blessed forever. Amen.

Let us pray,

Set us free, Lord.
Set us free from the idols that bind us.
Make us into a gospel people, Lord.
Give us vision for our schools and for our kids.

Give us vision of your audacious Kingdom,
your radical justice,
your radical inclusion,
your radical welcome,
your radical rule in our lives.

Forgive us when we have aided and abetted Caesar.

Forgive us when we have bowed the knee to false lords.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come and heal our churches, our schools, our lives.

Come and bring the power of your gospel into our lives.

Come soon, Lord Jesus.

Amen