

Perhaps the worst question on *Desert Island Discs* is the last one: of your eight records, which is the one you would save if you could only have one? It must have been bad enough whittling a lifetime's music down to eight choices in the first place, but then just having one record must be a nightmare. There are 66 books in the Bible. If you had to, which eight would you choose to keep? And if you could only have one, which would it be? It's an awful and unfair question, but for many theologians and writers and ministers and members of congregations down the centuries, the Letter to the Romans would be high on the list.

Just think of what it contains. Here are the high points of Christian thinking; passages which have kept theologians in jobs and sustained the believing and inspired the faith of millions ever since they were written. Paul has addressed the question of those who live without hearing the good news of Jesus Christ and what God will do with them; the nature of human wrongdoing and God's righteous judgement; the fact that all humanity is equal before God and all humanity needs the righteousness which comes through faith; the truth that sinful human beings are justified only through Jesus Christ; the joy of knowing that the Christian is filled with the Spirit and inextricably included in God's forgiveness, healing and salvation; the difficult problem of the Jews, God's ancient people, and their part in the new Covenant through Jesus Christ; and the promise found in God's new people, the Church, the Body of Christ.

And that's just up to Chapter 12 verse 8. I guess if you were going to have just one book from the Bible you might want something which had more of the life of Christ in it, rather than a theological description of the place of Christ in the saving history of the universe, but I was once made to learn Romans 8. 38 and 39 – the verses which speak of nothing in all creation being able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and I think they have shaped my thinking and believing ever since. So Romans makes it into my top eight, definitely.

These are the mountain peaks of Christian thinking. But at Chapter 12, and certainly from verse 9, the mountain peaks give way to more humble, day to day, more practical passages. If we are God's new creation; if we are redeemed and rescued and forgiven through Christ; if we are justified in Christ and able to stand confidently before God our Judge; if we are the new Israel, the people of God, the Body of Christ...how will people know, and how will we show them? It is not enough to say that we are saved through faith, it is not enough to declare to people that God has done all this for us in Christ Jesus, we can't simply put on a T shirt that says we are a Christian, or a fish badge on our car, and think that's enough. There is more to it than this. We must live the life.

There is no shortage of good advice in the world. In newspapers, broadcasts, on Facebook and Twitter, in self help books and in classes from everything from slimming to financial management, there is tried and tested advice about stuff which will help us and make our lives run more smoothly. You could easily slot Paul's advice and encouragement in Romans 12.9 ff into a Twitter feed or make each statement your Facebook status, or stick it on a poster outside your house and, if people took some notice, the world might be a better place.

Love without hypocrisy: mean what you say. Hate evil. Love what is good. Make every effort to live in relationships which are reciprocal, where there is give and take. Make your life full of rejoicing and compassion, patience and hard work. Respond to hatred with love, to insult with blessing. Get rid of pride, and walk in the shoes of those who are at the bottom of the pile. Be slow in passing judgment – there may be more to the situation than you know. It really is fantastic stuff, and if you read it every morning this week, and let it have its influence, so that you keep your big mouth shut, and when you finally open it you speak words of calm, which move the situation on and take the needs of the person you are talking to into account, then your life and mine will definitely improve.

The problem which some commentators have with this passage is that it looks exactly like all those self help books and Twitter feeds which promise you that you can do all this yourself. In theological terms it looks like “salvation by works”, as if you can notch up enough “Kingdom of Heaven Club Card Points” by being nice to people that God will have no choice but to let you in. That’s why it’s vital to see this passage as part of the whole letter to the Romans. Living in this way will not convince God to save us: to live in this way to express, to make visible, our new life in Christ. Love, humility, service, forgiveness, goodness, patience and rejoicing are now part of our Christian DNA, our nature. Saved through Christ, loved by God, this is what we are, not what we aspire to be.

Paul invites the Romans to become what they already are, and two thousand years later Paul asks us to do the same. We are in Christ. We are baptised, and our old nature has been washed away. We are welcome at God’s table, where we eat and drink as part of a new community. This is who we are. Let it out, says Paul. Show others that your identity is not in how much you earn, what people think of you, how well you do your job, how skilled you are, what brilliant things you have. Let people know that you don’t have to get to the top of the pile, be the best or the strongest, to know that you are secure, that you are loved, that you are given worth and value. Show that to people by “associating with the lowly” (v. 16). In the Authorised Version it says “condescend to those of low estate”. Our worth is found in that we are loved by God, saved through Christ. That means we can go out and do what he did, and be with those he was with. And some of them weren’t nice.

How will people know you are a Christian? Why not go home, take out this passage, get a piece of paper and a pen, and write it out. You could type it...and in the act of writing it for yourself have a think about the relationships, the people, the situations it applies to. This is right here, right now. Rejoice in Jesus Christ. Love someone. Forgive someone. Repay evil with good. And then people will meet with Christ, and that’s what we are about. Amen.