

In this passage, we come across Paul in a very private moment. Paul is engaged in prayer. His prayer is powerful and personal and very painful. I don't know if you have ever come before God on behalf of someone you love, someone you care about, and yet someone who will have nothing to do with the faith. You love that person. You know that God loves that person. And yet that person wants nothing to do with God. If you have ever been there, you have a small clue of what the apostle Paul is experiencing.

This is a very private moment; a very personal and painful prayer. Paul cries out, “I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” Paul is concerned about his kinsmen, the Jewish people. Five years ago, the Jewish people had been expelled from Rome. The Emperor Claudius was attempting to maintain law and order in the city. There had been civil unrest and so he acted as previous emperors had done and expelled the Jews from Rome. When Claudius died, his expulsion died with him. The Jewish people were now returning to Rome and yet, the question was, how would the church receive them? What had begun as a movement of faith among the Jews was now predominantly Gentile. The Jews had left but the church had remained and grown with Gentile believers. Paul was worried, not only about the Jews who did not believe but also about the Gentiles who may not see any reason to care about the Jewish people.

Paul knows that not all of his Jewish brothers and sisters have believed in Jesus. Because of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, it would be very easy for the Christian church to become a Gentile church, that does not see or value or care about the Jewish remnant. So Paul finds himself overwhelmed with pain and personal love and he wishes that he himself could be cut off from Christ, if that could save the Jewish people. It's a very Christ-like thing to say. Paul's heart is filled with Christ-like love.

I say that because Jesus led the way. He was willing to be cut off from God; willing to drink the cup of his Father's wrath; willing to be forsaken by God and condemned, that the kingdom of God might be opened to all people who trust in him. It's because of Jesus that your sins are forgiven and that you are now part of the people of God, people who live out God's greater story. This is what the apostle Paul is doing in his prayer. He is living by that promise, letting God's greater story, God's greater vision, shape his prayer and his life in self-sacrificial love.

Sometimes we can lose sight of this larger story. Faith can become a personal matter, something that we reduce to a private experience to help us get through the week. Paul awakens you and me this morning to the fact that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

Consider the Old Testament reading this morning. God's call to his people to come and eat. This is more than a foretaste of the feeding of the 5,000. This is part of God's vision of a

banquet for all peoples. God speaks of an everlasting covenant made with David. Through this great leader and the Messiah who will come from his bloodline, Israel will call nations they know not--and nations that did not know them will run to them. Suddenly, we begin to see a much larger table and a much greater feast. We begin to overhear God's promises throughout the Old Testament to feed and care for his people. From the manna that falls from heaven to the rocks that flow with water in the wilderness, from the table that the Lord our shepherd prepares to the teaching that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." This is the banquet Jesus was talking about in all of his wedding parables; and this banquet, this feast in the kingdom of God, lies ahead of all of us, as part of God's people, gathered from all nations, who live by the promises of God.

Amazingly, that same feast is set before you today—a heavenly meal of Jesus' body and blood. When you eat and drink at this altar you step into this greater story. For a moment, heaven and earth are joined together in the activity of feasting, of fellowship, of worship. It's not just a future event—it's happening now. Jesus giving himself to you now. God's saints and angels surrounding you now. And having experienced this great gift together, there's really only one thing that we're supposed to do—and that is bring other people to this table. Make this a bigger banquet. There is plenty of grace to share, more than enough to go around, provided by the most generous Host. Let's pray to him now: