



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

**The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector***  
**John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music***  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

*The Fifth Sunday in Lent*

*Choral Evensong*

*at 4pm*

+

A Sermon by  
The Reverend J. Anthony Fletcher  
Honorary Assistant  
on  
Romans 12:1-21

+

*IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT*

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (AV)

The Letter of Paul to the Romans is unique amongst his writings in that it is sent to a Church which he himself had not founded or even visited. The result of this was that this Letter is very different from the others. Mostly the others had been written in response to a problem that had arisen in a church where Paul had laboured, which meant that the Letter dealt largely, though not exclusively, with the problem in hand, and didn't give Paul the chance to write at length about his overall views and hopes for the fledgling Christian Church.

But Romans is different. There was no immediate problem to resolve, except that Paul had to introduce himself to a Church that already existed, that must have heard about him and may well have been a bit suspicious of him. We don't know the origins of the Church in Rome. Saint Luke in the Acts of the Apostles doesn't help beyond mentioning Aquila and Priscilla with whom Paul lived in Corinth and who had recently arrived there from Rome.

Paul has already preached the Gospel in the strategic centres of population in the East and his restlessness now urges him to reach out to places where Christ is not yet known. He declares his intention to visit Rome as part of his missionary activity in the Western Mediterranean, culminating in a proposed visit to Spain – which he probably never actually made. So Paul writes to the Church in Rome to explain his understanding of the Christian Gospel so that he may be the more readily accepted when he eventually arrives there.

The first part of his Letter – the first eleven chapters – is really a summary of what Paul believes. It is here that he deal with the great subjects like the need of salvation for all mankind, about justification and sanctification, and about life in Christ. It is about how we human beings achieve a right relationship with God that will bring us ultimately to share fully in his kingdom. He is writing to a Church that is almost certainly made up largely of new believers drawn from the pagan world with a sprinkling of Jewish Christians, so he tries to address the needs of both groups, and to see how they each fit into the divine plan.

The passage we heard today as the second reading marks the end of this part of the Letter and begins to teach us what difference all this belief makes in our relationships both with God and with one another.

So, with all this weight of theology behind him, the discussion of how a man can be put in a right relationship with God is over and Paul moves on to what is expected from his Roman readers and, thus, from us?

Saint Paul offers us a vision where, different though we are, we are one body in Christ, each with our own gifts to put at the service of the Lord; and what he says about prophets and ministers and teachers applies equally to all of us with whatever talent and skill we possess.

He is encouraging us to build a world where genuine love is the foundation – a world where we can, as Paul says, “rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and be constant in prayer”. But the earth has not yet become the scene of true brotherhood. There are times, in fact, when the enormous power that we possess threatens to put an end to the human race itself. It is only through the cross and resurrection of Christ and the fulfillment of his new commandment of love that the world can be transformed and human perfection can be achieved.

We have walked up the steps of Saint Thomas today and we have entered the church. We have left behind us the commercialism, the emphasis on **man** and his wants, the hedonism of the world expressed in the activity of Fifth Avenue, and we have entered a world that is differently oriented, where the centre of all activity and thought is **God**.

If we have been in a brewery, or a fish shop or a perfumery, when we leave it we probably take some of the odour, scent, smell with us. Gradually as we go about in the open air, those specific smells will reduce. Conversely if we have been out in the open air, when we enter a building we bring with us something of the outdoor world.

It is the same when we come to church. We cannot suddenly change and put on our church-going face and forget the interests and problems and joys that we were involved in before we arrived. But as we settle down in church, and take our part in the service, this new atmosphere of God-centered life should enter us and allow us to see our lives from a different perspective. Our previous joys should be muted by comparison with the joy that Christ can bring into our lives. Our previous worries should take on a new perspective as we see them against the background of God’s activity and Christ’s self-offering on the cross. Our previous interests may well be seen as shallow and temporary.

In a similar way as we leave church we should take with us something of the “holy” that we have experienced here that will help us in leading our lives until we are next able to spend an hour or so with our maker and our fellow believers. That sense of the holy will gradually fade as we resume our lives in the world, and it will need regular re-charging, so that it remains a light ready to lighten and brighten our worlds when we need it and let it.

So be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Amen.