

Southern Asia Initiative

Together in Hope



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A biblical reflection based on Romans 1:11, 12

By Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala

Romans 1:11, 12

“For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gifts to strengthen you or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” (NRSV)

Prayer

Gracious God, we submit ourselves, as we reflect on these words, to be confronted by your will for each of us, for all of us, and for the world that you have created. Open our eyes, ears, and hearts to encounter a new understanding of your grace. An understanding that transforms lives, communities, and situations, enabling us to journey with you as you journey with all those striving to realize your reign here and now. We pray all of this in Christ’s name. Amen.



Introduction

We begin this biblical exploration with the perspective of engaging with Global Ministries’ Southern Asia Initiative 2019-20. Before we reflect on the text, it is essential to consider the context of Southern Asia.

To understand Southern Asia, it is helpful to recognize its larger setting as part of the continent of Asia. Asia is the most populous, vast, and diverse continent in the world. It is home to most of the world’s major religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Asia has been the site and source of wisdom and worldviews that shaped the histories and civilizations of not only Asia but also much of the world. In

spite of this rich and complex history of cultures, wisdom traditions, and spiritualities, as well as growing economies and giant strides in technological development, Asia is also home to a significant amount of the world's impoverished population. Recently, it has become a fertile ground for terrorism and state-terrorism, fundamentalism and bigotry, gross human rights violations and abuse, persistent violence against women, caste-discrimination, and many such injustices.

Amidst these realities and challenges, South Asian churches exist in many forms. Most of these churches, except for those in East Timor, are minority communities. Each has its own self-understanding and self-expression that are distinct and often different from others. However, despite their limitations and differences, most churches also continually work to respond together to human need and suffering while upholding the causes of justice, peace, and human dignity. This work is often done in partnership not just with other churches but also with people of different faiths and people's movements. Many of these churches are known for their pioneering efforts for social change and are lauded for their education and health services for the poorest of the poor. Many of these churches have a vibrant church life and are experiencing growth in membership.

During the Southern Asia Initiative, we shall draw lessons from the experiences of churches in Bangladesh, East Timor, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, even as the region includes many other countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Biblical Reflection

Against this backdrop of a vast and diverse Southern Asia and the churches there, let us try to understand the meaning of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Paul was a passionate and persistent Jew who persecuted Christians ruthlessly until he became a follower of Jesus after a dramatic conversion experience (Acts.9). He went on to become a pioneering apostle to non-Jewish communities, as well as an authoritative theologian whose writing shaped the thinking of the church. Paul's writings continue to do so even now through his many epistles. In spite of all the privileges that Paul's religious and cultural identities had bestowed, Paul gives us a window into his understanding of faith in these opening lines of his theologically dense letter to the church in Rome: "I am longing to see youso that we may mutually be encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

However, who are these Christians in Rome that Paul wants to learn from? These were mostly Jewish Christians who had suffered a great deal of persecution under the Roman Empire for holding on to their new faith. As many Gentile communities joined the church, there were also tensions within the congregations due to the Jewish insistence on Torah, circumcision, and other practices. While facing challenges from outside their communities and disagreement from within, these early churches grew in numbers and in the quality of their shared life together.

The Church in Rome was aware of both the unique makeup of their congregation and the hostility much of Rome carried toward their community. Paul makes this statement in verses 11 and 12, both as a teacher and as one willing to be taught. Paul is communicating that faith is neither a belief system nor a rigid set of rules, but something that grows when people meet to share and receive experiences of God's grace in their actual life situations. Such experience of shared encouragement is possible only with attitudes of humility and openness. Paul also implies that faith is not a mere inward feeling but an experience of hope amidst despair. Let us understand these in detail.

Encounters are necessary for our faith to be an instrument of transformation

The two disciples recalled their encounter with the stranger on the road to Emmaus: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32) Faith in the Risen Lord is an expression of exuberance amidst hopelessness and despair. Faith cannot be set and driven by rigid codes of belief. Such obstacles stand in the way of the liberating and transformative fervor of God’s grace. Many of us are taught to believe that our own religious convictions are absolute truths and that the particular way in which we engage with the world is the most appropriate. This understanding leads us to interact with others from a place of personal superiority, and we fail to see God already present and at work in unexpected places and among unexpected people.

The contemporary culture of hatred, contempt, and fear of others seems to draw on such narrow religious understandings. Most world religions, including Christianity, while seeking to further their own particular mission, have played a significant role in this process of ‘othering.’ Operating alongside concepts of nationhood, ethnicity, racism, patriarchy, and casteism (in my own Indian experience), religions have encouraged people to see themselves and those who are like them as superior to those who are “other.” I believe this common but often-ignored trait of ‘othering’ has been the source of most evils.

Colonialism and neo-colonialism, slavery and modern forms of slavery, violence against women, child labor, environmental exploitation and destruction, corruption and abuse of power all have their roots in this process of ‘othering.’ Some may have the attitude that *‘I am more important than you. My needs, wants, comforts, luxuries, dreams, fantasies, safety, security, health, and wealth are more important than yours because I am special. I am superior to you.’* This attitude violates, excludes, and exploits many. Such views deprive us of the opportunity to be taught and enriched. Furthermore, as history tells us, such attitudes have led many religious expressions, institutions, and belief systems to become evil and destructive.

Paul tells us of the need to move out from our comfort zones and familiar circles to “comprehend the length and width and height and depth of God’s love” (Eph.3:18), transforming lives and situations. He tells the church in Rome, “Just as I tell you about my experience of faith, I also want to hear yours so that my own faith may be enriched by yours.” It is in such encounters we learn afresh about ourselves and find our convictions about our personal relationship with God validated.

Faith derided as foolishness

In opting to learn and be enriched by the community in Rome, Paul seems to say that neither the perspectives nor the preferences of the powerful and the privileged can restrict the freedom of the Spirit. Paul makes an important assertion about the distinctness of the Christian faith in his letter to the church in Corinth. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (I Cor 1: 27-30)

Paul seems to say that all in Christ’s Church hold value and have something to teach us, it is only our pride and prejudice that hinder us from learning these lessons from them. Unfortunately, traditional Christian theologies and practices as they evolved in intense political and economic contexts have

misshaped Christian attitudes to sustain relationships with the powerful. Consequently, while we affirm the need to be sensitive and compassionate, we tend to believe that the poor and those on the margins have no good news to share and nothing to offer but are only to learn and to receive. We fail to acknowledge and learn from their witness in their own lives and worlds. In our eagerness to teach and reach out to those in need, we fail to be taught by them. We fail to learn from their resilience, capacities to live out their hope, and acts of resistance to systemic evil.

We must realize we belong to a faith tradition that has evolved around the memory of the one who defied the power and glory of the contemporary political and religious establishments and, instead, embraced the identities and resources of marginalized people and their communities. He affirmed the act of a widow who gave two small copper coins as more significant than those who gave huge sums. He applauded the prayer of the scorned tax collector as more acceptable than that of the glorified Pharisee. He valued the faith of the despised gentile more than of those of his own centuries-old religious tradition. He rewarded poor Lazarus with a seat next to Abraham in his parable while the arrogant rich man was left to thirst forever. He defied the protocols and traditions of rituals and propriety for the sake of the healing of the sick. Also, he taught his disciples that to have and wield power is to be a servant, and even washed their feet on the night before he was killed. The biblical tradition itself is filled with the unveiling of God's presence and power among the Last, the Lost, and the Least. So, it is time we test our faith through such encounters, lest our faith cause more harm and damage to the earth and its people.

Faith, a wellspring of hope that transforms

Such an understanding of faith is the source of a spirituality of active hope, and a spirituality of engagement with God's world for the celebration of life. Paul, in the following chapters of his letter to the Romans, exhorts them. "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (12:2) In many places around the world, there are intense struggles for political freedom, economic justice, human rights, and human dignity. These movements and initiatives bring together thousands of people across religious, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries to struggle for justice, peace, and life for all. People forge alliances not because of religious motivation or ideological orientations but because of their belief in and commitment to values of justice and equity. In all such struggles and movements, spirituality is implied. If we believe that the imperatives to seek justice, love, freedom, and peace are divine, we must then hold that at the basis of every struggle and every move for liberation. The point here is that encounters in faith are not limited to religious convictions and conversations, but go beyond to find God in these struggles for the triumph of life amidst the forces of death and destruction.

The Southern Asia Initiative of Global Ministries in 2019-20 is a space for such encounters with people, communities, and churches that are distinct and different in many ways. Despite being small and many in multicultural contexts, as well as, in most cases, on the margins of the society, they strive to give an account of their hope through their engagement with people at risk. This includes those being trafficked or forced to migrate, with religious and ethnic minorities whose lives are violated in the name of God, those who are disempowered and dehumanized by the evils of the caste system, patriarchy, and with those victimized or exposed to disasters caused by climate change. These categories of people are not found only in the Southern Asia region, but also in the US, and in many places around the world. We hope that these encounters may inspire creative expressions of witness as we share together in hope.

Questions for Reflection

1. In an increasingly pluralistic world, and amidst daily personal encounters with people of many or no faiths, how do we feel about our own faith and self-understanding? How does it feel to be one among many?
2. What are the differences between being a believer and a disciple? What helps us better in living out our hope?
3. How do we understand God's priority for the poor and the demands that such an understanding places on us?

About the Author

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