

Chapter 71

Beloved Friends

(Romans 16:5b–9)

Paul continues, *Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the firstfruits of Asia for Christ*. Some of the people who are greeted in Romans 16 were specially close to Paul. Epaphroditus was apparently a much-loved friend. He was staying at Rome at this time but Paul had known him from elsewhere. Paul calls him ‘the firstfruits of Asia’; it means that he was the first to be converted in Ephesus, the capital of Roman Asia. In the Mosaic law the ‘firstfruits’ of a harvest were offered to God before any of the harvest was used. The picture-language Paul uses here suggests that Epaphroditus was the first to come to salvation but there were many more to come. Epaphroditus is only the first of the crop. Paul had a good relationship with this first Ephesian convert.

⁶*Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you*, says Paul. Mary is otherwise unknown; the name is common. She was some kind of Christian worker living in Rome and known to Paul.

⁷*Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, and who were in Christ before me*. Here we have another example of the ‘ministry of couples’. For Andronicus and Junias seem again to be a husband-and-wife team. Although the name here could be ‘Junias’, the name of a man, it is more likely ‘Junia’, the name of a woman. There are some who think we have reference

here to a lady-apostle in the phrase ‘Andronicus and Junias . . . who are outstanding among the apostles’. But one must not build too much on a small and probably not-very-significant phrase. There are four difficulties for those who want to see a highly authoritative woman apostle here. (i) It is not 100 per cent certain that the name is that of a woman – although the probability is high. It would surely be a mistake to build a case for woman-apostles on such a dubious verse. (ii) ‘Outstanding among the apostles’ could mean ‘outstanding in the eyes of the apostles’, without it being certain that they themselves were apostles. (iii) A more important point is this: the word ‘apostle’ can be used in a quite weak sense. Philippians 2:25 and 2 Corinthians 8:23 both speak of ‘messengers’ (the Greek is *apostoloi*). Romans 16:7 certainly does not refer to any woman who was on a par with the Twelve, or on a par with Paul. There were women who were ‘eye-witnesses of the resurrection’ but although such eye-witness testimony was a qualification for a certain kind of apostleship (see Acts 1:22) no woman eye-witness of the resurrection was considered as an apostle in Acts 1 – or anywhere else. So the case for women-apostles in a high-level sense of the term is altogether weak and dubious. In the sense of ‘lady-missionary’ the usage is quite probable – but those who want women-apostles are thinking of something more significant than that. However, the case cannot be proved from here. (iv) One must remember also that Paul seems to be referring to a husband-and-wife team. If in one sense or another Andronicus and Junias are apostles, it will quite likely mean simply that Junia shares her husband’s work (just as in some circles today a male pastor will give the title ‘Pastor’ to his wife as well as to himself). It would still not be a proof of any kind of **independent** woman-apostle.

This couple were Jewish (‘my kinsmen’). They had become well known for their willingness to suffer for Christ (‘my fellow

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prisoners'). They had been Christians for a long time (' . . . and who were in Christ before me').

Verse 8 mentions another friend of Paul. *Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord*. Ampliatus or (in its shorter form) Amplias is a name which is found several times in ancient inscriptions. It is one of several names in Romans 16 that have connections with the emperor's family. A century ago Bishop Lightfoot of Durham listed them,^a and Lightfoot's material has often been used – as it is by me – since that time. Slaves were often given names linked to the family that owned them. The presence in Romans 16 of these 'imperial' names does not generally mean that the Roman aristocracy were coming to salvation – although we shall see one case where that is a possibility. It rather means that the gospel had had some success among the slaves of 'Caesar's household' (see Philippians 4:22). It is likely that Ampliatus is a 'freedman', a one-time slave who has been given his freedom.

Verse 9 continues, *Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved*. Urbanus was known to Paul but – it seems – was not so much a personal friend. He refers to 'our fellow-worker'. Stachys was a friend of Paul but nothing else is known about him. Again both of these names are known to have been used by members of the imperial household, and by their slaves. These two men also were probably freedman, or maybe they were still in slavery. Some of the employees of Caesar himself had come to faith in Jesus, and had become notable servants of God. People can come to salvation in astonishing places. We get a surprise when we read of the 'saints in Caesar's household' in Philippians 4:22. God can have his people anywhere. The principle is: God chooses the common people, but eventually the blessings of the common people get noticed and the common people take the gospel in the place where some of the high-born people are to found. The rich like (sometimes!) to help the poor, but here the poor help the rich.

Preaching Through the Bible: Romans

It is the rich man's 'humiliation' (James 1:10) but it is the way the gospel works.

Note

- a. See the evidence set out by J.B. Lightfoot, in his *Philippians* (various reprints of the 12th edn.), pp. 174–175.