

“And So We Came To Rome”

Romans 1.1-17; Romans 16.3-16; Acts 28.11-16

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And so we came to Rome. Two thousand years ago, this was the most important city in the Western world – the great center of the Roman Republic, which morphed shortly before Jesus was born into a mighty Empire that stretched from Spain and France in the west to Turkey and Egypt and Israel in the east. Mighty cities and kingdoms had been swallowed up by countless hordes of Roman militia. Rome’s power and might were undisputed: there was no one who could stand in her way.

Under the Romans, during the “Golden Age” of Augustus when Jesus was born, trade and commerce flourished. It was easy to get from one part of the empire to another, either by magnificently built Roman roads, or by wondrously constructed ships that traversed the majestic waters of the Mediterranean Sea. There were, of course, storms and shipwrecks; your safety wasn’t guaranteed; but that didn’t stop the Romans. Boats were going everywhere, all the time ... and there still are today.

My family and I spent four whole days in Rome. I enjoyed this city immensely. It felt more like an elaborate network of interconnecting neighborhoods than a sprawling metropolis. There were sites to see – the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Roman forum. My heart nearly stopped when we saw the Arch of Titus. This had been built in the year 82 AD to commemorate the various victories of Emperor Titus. One particular image on this arch was very familiar to me – a carved depiction celebrating the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 AD. You can see the Romans carrying off the *menorah*, the sacred lampstand, from the Holy of Holies in the very heart of the Jerusalem temple. To be standing a mere twelve feet away from this – this – I don’t know, what do you call it? *Art? Commemoration? Insult?* – was monumental. There are still Jews living in Rome today; Andrew and Colin and I walked through a Jewish neighborhood. That arch still says to the Jews, “We kicked your butts once.” It’s a graphic reminder of a terrible time in Jewish history – the city of Jerusalem had been under siege for more than half a year; there was famine and disease; the Jews were doing unspeakable things to try to stay alive. To see that arch, that carnage *commemorated* ... it’s like celebrating that the Holocaust happened. I was mesmerized and horrified all at once. Such *history* and *art* and *tragedy*, all rolled into one. Maybe we should see it as a monument testifying to the horrors of war.

Back when I was in high school I had three years of Latin, with a fantastic teacher who told us the stories of Romulus and Remus, and the Punic Wars, and fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire. We learned what buildings had been built in what sequence; we had a map of the city that kept

changing as the city grew and expanded and developed. To climb the Palatine hill, to walk along the Tiber River, to meander through the forum where Marc Antony delivered Julius Caesar's funeral oration ... I found myself wishing that I could remember all the stories, that I still had that map.

There was a community of Christians here in Rome within about 25 years of Jesus' death and resurrection. The apostle Paul wrote his magnificent letter to this church in Rome in about the year 57 or 58 AD. This is one of the most significant pieces of literature ever written; I hope you've all read it at some point in your Christian journey. Perhaps more than any other New Testament book, it tells us who Jesus is and what Jesus *really did* for each one of us. But it's not a treatise; it was a *letter*, written to a group of people who already believed in Jesus, and – as is attested by that long list of names in Romans 16 – Paul knew many of these people personally, from his various travels. The contrast with Athens is remarkable: he knew *nobody* in Athens, was *barely* successful making any converts, and did *not* succeed in establishing a church there. Rome was a whole different world, ripe and ready for the gospel.

Paul came to Rome a couple years later, probably in AD 60. It had been his great desire to one day come to Rome, and he finally got his wish, but only after being arrested in Jerusalem and held as a prisoner for two years. Because he was a Roman citizen, he was able to make an appeal that the Emperor hear his case, so he was eventually transferred, under guard, to a ship bound for Rome. There was a storm; the ship was wrecked; Paul and some of the other survivors managed to make it to the island of Malta. Three months later they sailed for Italy. His companion wrote, "and so we came to Rome." Paul was placed under house arrest while he awaited trial. The book of Acts tells that he spent two whole years there, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." (Acts 28.31) Nothing in the New Testament tells us how he died, but a variety of later writers tell us he was beheaded during the reign of the Emperor Nero.

The apostle Peter came here too. The last time we see Peter in the New Testament, he is in Jerusalem for a meeting (Acts 15), but tradition has it that he eventually made his way to Rome, and became the leader of the Christian community there. Some people say he was the first Pope. The stories about Peter say that he was also executed during the reign of the Emperor Nero. He wasn't beheaded, he was crucified; except he requested to be crucified in a manner different than Jesus, because he felt himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. So they crucified him upside-down. His remains, according to tradition, were buried on Vatican Hill, just to the west of the Tiber River, where St. Peter's Basilica is now. This massive door adorns the front of St. Peter's Basilica, and it commemorates both apostles: the left side tells the story of Paul; the right, the story of Peter. There he is, being crucified upside-down. There's a very old saying: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Martyrs, like Peter and Paul. If it hadn't been for them, and their faithful witness, courage, and devotion, Christianity would have died, and we would probably all be worshiping some other god.

Today, one of the most important Christian cities is there, on that hill; the Vatican City, where the Pope lives, a state unto itself. We had a four-hour tour of the Vatican Museum. Portions of it were underwhelming – how many statues does one museum need to hold? – but other parts were magnificent. As we proceeded from chamber to chamber on our own private tour, two rooms in particular attracted my attention; one featured paintings or frescos commemorating some of the most

important Greek and Roman philosophers and historians (like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and Herodotus); a second chamber immediately adjacent commemorated Christian theologians from the first four centuries (like Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Jerome). Those two rooms were *fascinating*, and reminded me of just how much *treasure* there is in the writings of the ancient world and the early church, treasure that many of us just don't know enough about.

Then, of course ... the Sistine Chapel. I have to confess: I was prepared to be disappointed. I didn't want to get my hopes up too much, for fear that I would be let down. Let me tell you, that chapel is as *astoundingly* magnificent as you've ever heard, and more beyond that. We were fortunate to get early enough that it wasn't thronged with people, and we had time for leisure to take it all in. We had our own private tour guide who was *very* patient with us. Michelangelo's ceiling – *astounding*, even though I'd seen pictures. The majestic art, the vivid colors, the three-dimensional feel, the fascinating stories behind the art – three panels that tell the story of creation, three panels that tell the story of Adam and Eve, three panels that tell the story of Noah, five sibyls from the Greco-Roman world who (some people say) foretold the coming of Christ, seven Old Testament prophets, fourteen arches commemorating the ancestors of Jesus (though it's not *quite* the same list as what we have in the New Testament), and four corner scenes depicting episodes from the Old Testament and the Apocrypha when the Jewish people were nearly done in, either by their enemies or by their own sinful ways, but God rescued them – *the whole thing is creative and artistic genius!* There is simply no other word. Beneath the ceiling, on the walls, by other artists, are six frescos telling the story of the life of Moses, and seven frescos telling the story of the life of Jesus. These were fascinating, and linked together: each scene in the frescos about Moses parallels a scene in the frescos about Jesus: Moses was circumcised, Jesus was baptized; Moses gave the Law, Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount; and so on. Above each of the paintings is an inscription in Latin which make it very clear that these stories mirror each other, with the exception that Moses *died* – and Jesus *lives*. There's a seventh painting, and a seventh inscription, that depicts Christ's resurrection. And there is one final painting, the archangel Michael disputing with Satan about Moses' body (a story alluded to in Jude 9), but it lacks an inscription. The message is obvious: *nothing parallels the resurrection of Christ*. Our veteran tour guide had never noticed some of those details. There are times when that seminary education comes in handy!

And so we came to Rome, "the eternal city." Like Paul, like Peter. What struck me the most: all that history, all that art, all those *throng*s of people visiting those historic sites ... it's not just a tourist trap. Christianity is alive and well. There were people praying in St. Peter's Basilica. There were people confessing their sins to a priest in the Sistine Chapel. Some of our tour guides were very clearly *Christians*, not just art historians or archaeologists. *There are still people telling other people the good news of Jesus Christ*. We hear a lot about the decline of Christianity in the Western world, and it's certainly true – numbers have shrunk dramatically, a lot of churches have closed, many have been torn down or repurposed – but the gospel is *alive*. Wherever people hold on to a *living faith*, hearing the stories, *living* the faith, hopefully *sharing* it with their friends or neighbors or the next generations – the gospel is *alive*. Peter and Paul may have come to a violent end in the city of Rome, but the legacy they established endures *two thousand years* later. It's not just *history* ... it's a *living faith*.

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