

Sixth Sunday after Trinity: St Thomas-on-The Bourne 2023

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. Romans 8, 1-2

Some years ago, I was asked by a journalist to imagine that I was to be the host at an unusual dinner party. I was told that I could choose any three guests from history to join me at the table. I decided to choose Dennis Healey, Edith Piaf, and St Paul.

Why those three? I chose Dennis Healey because he argued that all good politicians need a hinterland--- so I would like to hear him talk about politics and photography. I chose Edith Piaf, because apart from having a voice which sends shivers down my spine, she seemed to have an indomitable spirit; and I chose St Paul, because I should love to have a conversation with him about some of his ideas.

This morning's epistle is a case in point. I would like to discuss it with him. Writing to the young church in Rome, he makes an astonishing claim. This is what he writes:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death...

He inhabits a binary thought-world: on the one side is the flesh, on the other side is the spirit. The flesh is all that is bad, including sin. But he sees Christians, to use his exact phrase, as *being freed from the law of sin and death*. But is that actually true? Have we actually been freed from the law of sin and death?

What does he mean by the 'law of sin and death'? That 'law', he argues, is part of our very being. He gives us a wonderfully vivid picture of it: *'For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.'*

In other words, St Paul believes that all of us as human beings have a battle going on within our souls. We know what is right, but we do not necessarily do it. We fail. We make a lash up. Another way to put it is that we are in the grip of the seven deadly sins. Just to remind you, here is the list: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth. If anyone believes that they are not subject to at least one on that list...please see me afterwards...

But Paul claims that as followers of Christ we are freed from those sins.

I beg to differ. In truth, we are not. We may want to follow Christ to the letter. We may want to be one of his close disciples. We may want above all things to love and serve him...I do not doubt that those hopes are true for all of us here this morning. It is partly why we are here. And yet, and yet... in spite of our very best intentions, we frequently fail. We revert to type: we are proud and greedy, we are angry and envious and lustful, we are gluttons, we are slothful...

So, we are not free from what Paul calls the 'law of sin and death'. What is the underlying cause of this muddle?

Paul's answer is that it is sin which inhabits the depths of our being. It is sin that weakens our resolve to do good. And, for me, that makes a lot of sense. How else to explain this constant human inner conflict? Though, of course, calling this propensity 'sin' raises questions about its origins, but there isn't time, alas! to explore this now.

And then, what about our inability sometimes to do good? The Confession in the BCP states the human problem beautifully: 'We have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us...'

I want to suggest that that BCP confession points a way forward, it offers a solution ...firstly, it is a *confession*, that is, it acknowledges that in the eyes of God we do indeed sin...but in Christ Jesus our sins are taken upon his shoulders and are carried to the Cross. And there his love and grace redeem and transforms us... not instantly, but gradually, gradually... it takes a lifetime. It does not happen overnight.

But secondly, the BCP confession is also a statement about our moral responsibility....'we have done those things we ought not to have done...' It won't do to blame everything on an uncontrollable inner force called 'sin'. We also have free-will. We have choice. But we also fail--- sometimes, time after time, after time...

It is a spiritual agony. There's no question about that. So, what can we do?

I think we can begin by honestly acknowledging the inner conflict... as human beings, none of us are free from it, that is how we all are. So, that means we need to make time to take stock. We can say with humiliating sincerity, this is who we are. This is what we are truly like...

Having done that, it is time for confession. We can come to God in the privacy of our own hearts, expressing our sorrow and repentance and ask for his mercy to enfold us and forgive us. And as we do so we should always, always remember the father in the Prodigal Son story who comes out to meet the son and embraces him...

And then we can and should pray to God for strength to pick ourselves up and try again...

That kind of confession is a continuous process, a lifetime's process, our inner conflicts do not cease, but in and through Christ we have access to God. And that is what Paul gets absolutely right, the astounding truth that the God who has revealed himself to us in Christ is full of grace and truth and love... and one who in his infinite mercy will continuously bind up our inner wounds and one day, in eternity, will make us whole.

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