

Trinity V, July 12th 2020

Roman 8.1-11 (Morning Prayer: Genesis 1:26-31; Eucharist: Matthew 7:13-20)

No Condemnation in Christ Jesus

Imagine someone playing the saxophone. Playing brilliantly. It's one of those soaring moments. The player is totally lost in what he's doing. All his attention, all his energy, all of him is pouring into that music. The notes are full of all the desire he knows and more besides.

Or, say, an artist, hard at work on some great painting. *Work* is not quite the right word, actually. What they're doing is certainly laborious, it's certainly exhausting, it requires stamina and concentration and discipline, but *work* doesn't quite capture it. This is not just a job, it's a passion. It's not so much *work* as *love*. Or maybe, even, as giving birth. Out of the depths of the artist, through all that hard labour comes something new, something beautiful – something which isn't the artist anymore but is filled with her spirit, charged with her life.

Christianity says that creation is a bit like that. We exist because God wanted there to be something that wasn't him, but sprang from deep within Him, and lived out all the divine beauty. He wanted to *rejoice* in us. It's a little like when we have children. We do so not just to reproduce our genetic code, or to ensure someone will look after us when we're old. At our best, we have children because it's in our nature to spring out of ourselves. To pour the best of us into someone that isn't us. Who is utterly ours, yet utterly free: free to take the best of us and live it out in their own way, and we'll rejoice as they do.

That's what a human person is. A creature filled with the best of God, created to live it out as only they can, to make the Father's heart rejoice. To be human is astonishingly wonderful. This, incidentally, is the root of all Christian ethics. It is the reason why bosses must pay decent wages; that people must have good, affordable housing; why we treat sex carefully, and say that the poor and the weak must be protected. Human beings are not the mere by-product of a blind process of evolution. We are children of God. We are *intended*, made with a destiny in mind. As C.S. Lewis once brilliantly put it, you have never met a mere mortal. You live in 'a society of possible gods and goddesses, where the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.'

C.S. Lewis would at this point be quite cross. Finish the quotation, he'd say, give them the full thing. Here it is: 'where the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship ... or else, *or else*, a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.' A horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. There's nothing, you see, *inevitable* about glory. God's creation doesn't *have to* turn out the way God planned. Just like our children can take the best of us, and wreck themselves, and break our hearts, so it is with God. He made us to shine like the sun, but we can slide into darkness. We were made for life, and that word means more richness and wonder than we can possibly imagine, but we can, with ease, slide into death. That road is easy, and there are many who take it.

At which point, a detour. You have probably come across the expression 'there are no bad people, just people who sometimes do bad things.' No bad people, just people who sometimes do bad things. It is, understandably, a popular saying. After all, if you say the *person* is bad, not only do you sound very, very judgmental but it sounds like you think they can never change, that the only fruit *this* particular tree is ever going to bear will be rotten. And moreover, Christians surely want to say that people are created *good*? That's what Genesis 1 says: God saw all that he'd made, you and me included, and behold it was *very good*. So yes: no bad people, just people who sometimes do bad things.

The biblical view, I'm afraid, is grimmer. Genesis 1 does indeed say that human beings were made good: but Genesis 3 says we wrecked ourselves. When Adam and Eve lifted the apple off the tree – and it is of course, a parable not a factual bit of history – when they lifted the apple, they did more than break a rule. They broke *themselves*. They were made to be filled with God's glory, and they chose something else – greed, power, ego, call it what you will. It isn't *God*, and God is what they were made for. God is what they need, strangely, to be most themselves. To use a silly analogy, when they lifted the apple, it was like filling a petrol car with diesel. The human spirit can't *run* on any other fuel than God. It sputters and chokes and dies. Which is why the saying 'no bad people, just people who do bad things' doesn't work. When you do bad things, you don't just break rules, you break yourself. You make yourself less and less capable of doing good, and more and more likely to do bad. You get in the habit of lying, the habit of cheating, of lust or pride or whatever it is. You begin to slide down into darkness.

That's what Paul is talking about when he talks about 'condemnation' in the first verse of chapter eight, our reading today. As a race, he says, we're sliding down. We have, collectively and individually, damaged ourselves so badly that whatever was true at creation, whatever great destiny was ours, we've lost it. All have sinned, he says, and fallen short of the glory of God. We were meant to be this blaze of beauty, this glittering display of God's life shared out and lived freely. And what are we? At best, sharers in a world gone so wrong that the damage has entered deep into our lives. We're headed not for glory but futility. We're withering down into death, physically and spiritually.

At which point *Paul* would be cross and saying, finish the quotation, give them the full thing. Because of course, what Paul says about condemnation is that *there is none*. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. What does he mean? That there was one life lived as God intended it. One life lived that carried perfectly into the world all the goodness and beauty and power of God, and lived it out freely and without distortion. One life which from first to last heartbeat steadily and totally rejected sin; steadily and totally refused to be fuelled by anything except union with God. Which, when the dark powers tried to seduce him, refused them, cast them aside, and condemned them like rubbish. One true, perfect image of God: Jesus Christ.

And Jesus, says Paul, did two things. First of all, as the righteous one, and so the one on whom death had no grip, he freely entered the futility which was not His. You and I were headed for ruin: He was not. His destiny was life, and glory. He *chose* to take ours. He chose to take ours because even though we were not good, we were loved. And when he took our destiny, he took it away from us. Now, we *cannot* end in futility and misery. However much we deserve it – and we might deserve it very richly – Jesus Christ on the Cross says that God is never giving up on us. That even at our most wicked, most desperate, most broken, there need be no condemnation. Not because we are good, but because we are loved. Even when all hope is gone, Jesus Christ will be there, holding out his hand.

And when we take his hand: the second thing. We find ourselves, in Paul's phrase, 'in Christ Jesus'. *In* Christ Jesus. That is to say, now, the deepest thing, the truest thing about us is not *us*. At any rate, not the old, compromised, gone wrong us. The deepest thing about us, as we heard last week, is Jesus. His life, his *rightness*, begins to work its way through us, changing everything about us, making us what we were always meant to be. Everything about us will sing with the glory of God. It is not so yet. Indeed, it may for now be quite hidden. But as baptised people it is the supreme truth about us. A spring has been planted deep within us, deeper than our most intimate selves. And that spring is the life of Jesus, the life of God, flowing through us and in us, undoing the damage, filling us with glory, making us final and freely ourselves, arrived at last in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. To him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.