

Rom. 6:12-23; Matthew 6:19-24

Therefore, begins our reading from Romans. *Therefore.*

A silly way to start, because you don't know what's just been said.

To be fair, if last week had been normal, we would have heard the first section of Romans 6. Paul argues there that when a person believes and is baptised, they're joined to Jesus. It's not just that they think Jesus is the Son of God and they want to follow him. It's more mysterious than that, more powerful. Paul teaches that in baptism, the death and resurrection of Jesus stop being things that just happened outside you, just another historical event. They become things happening *inside you*. Jesus comes inside you, killing whatever needs killing – your pride, selfishness and greed – and making a new you, fit for life with God.

This, for Paul, is what saves us. He has spent quite a bit of Romans 1-5 trying to show that all the other ways – trying very hard to be good people, keeping the moral law, being a good Jew – don't work. They leave you stuck. Only the death and resurrection of Jesus planted inside you, says Paul, only *grace* to use his shorthand, can save. There's no point trying to save yourself, to make *yourself* ready for life with God. Match-sticks can't outshine the sun. Forget it. You are saved by grace.

Now at one level that sounds like really good news. But wait a moment. After all, if it is really true that we are saved by grace, and not by being good, then some other things *aren't* true. Take, for instance, folk who say, well, so and so doesn't believe very much, but he's really Christian in his actions, and that's what really counts, isn't it? Being a good person? Usually, we all nod agreement. But Paul would say *no* – your actions aren't what count. What counts is whether you have Jesus at work in you. You're saved by grace, not by you.

To which there are many objections, but one of them is this – instantly fired back by Paul's opponents. If being good doesn't matter, why not be bad? Why bother trying really hard to love other people and do all the right things if at the end of the day, God doesn't really mind? Why shouldn't someone lie, cheat, exploit and kill his way through life, and then at the end say he's sorry, and God will forgive him anyway because it's all about grace not works? Remember that hymn: 'the vilest offender who truly believes / that moment from

Jesus a pardon receives...’ Well, there is a sense in which that’s true – but the first reaction has to be *really?* That *moment?* Can grace really be so cheap? Is Jesus some kind of get out of jail free card?

That’s what Paul is trying to answer in today’s section of Romans. He is appalled that someone could suggest this. And his basic answer is to say, look, don’t you realise that if you go on acting in these ways – lying, exploiting, cheating – everytime you do, it gets a bit more grip on you? That it becomes more likely you’ll do it again, and again, and again, and to greater and greater degrees? Cheat a bit here, you’ll probably cheat a bit more there. Watch a bit of pornography, you’ll end up watching lots. Indulge a little bigotry; it’s amazing how it grows. You become *slaves*, Paul says. What you thought you were choosing, ends up *owning* you. It’ll begin to drive, you compel you. And where’s it driving? All of it, Paul says, ends in death: physical death yes, but also moral death, spiritual death: just misery and ruin. Why go on *choosing* it, when you know where it leads?

And yet more why choose it, when you know what you could be instead? You know Jesus. You know what He is like. You know his beauty and brilliance and freedom, and you know He wants to change you into all those things. You know they’ll never die. They don’t end in ruin, but flower into unspeakable glory. *You* will flower into unspeakable glory. But not, of course, *against* your will. You do have to *choose* it, Paul says, again and again and again. You can’t make yourself fit for life with God, absolutely: it’s all about grace. But grace needs you to at least work with it – to actively choose God’s way, of love, service, sacrifice: day in, day out. And once again, those choices have consequences. Except this time, it’s not sin and death that get a grip on us, that begin to drive and compel us: it’s *righteousness* – the justice and goodness of God. And it drives us not into ruin and death, but into glory. This, says Paul, this is the kind of slavery you *want*. It’s in this obedience that you’re really, finally, *free*.

And here is a striking thought. Paul didn’t know the Church in Rome especially well. He hadn’t started the church there. When he wrote the letter, he had never even visited. We think he wrote partly to set out his stall, to introduce the Roman church to his teaching. You’ve probably heard all sorts of rumours about me: well, this is what I really think – a fairly considered, full, nuanced statement. Not the kind of crisis management shooting from the hip letters that we find him writing to say, Corinth or Galatia.

And, in this introductory letter to people he didn't know that well, and had no particular reason to believe were exceptionally bad, Paul writes this: *thanks be to God, that you, having once been slaves to sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You once presented your members as slaves to impurity, to greater and greater iniquity ... you were slaves of sin.* This is quite something to say to people you don't know. I suspect you would not have been impressed if I'd said it in my very first sermon here.

It would of course have been true for some of us – in first century Rome, or here. Some of us know we've been slaves, in things that lead to death. We've had addictions, we've had patterns of wrongness that we just couldn't break. If all of us knew everything about everyone, I think there would be a lot of red faces round here. However, the really important thing to notice here is that Paul is not just talking about especially scandalous and embarrassing things, the kind of things we go all secretive and hush-hush about. It's not just sex and drugs. Paul's talking about *all* the Roman Christians. *All of you* have been slaves of sin. *All of you* have been trapped in behaviour which leads to death, slaves whether you knew it or not. Now maybe it was nice, respectable slavery without an orgy or a high in sight – but slavery it was, and thank God you've left it behind.

So what's he talking about? Well, a quick glance across at the Gospel reading gives us the prime candidate – the love of money. If your life is really about making sure you have wealth and comfort – if that's what *drives* you, well, you are wallowing in impurity as much as any fornicator. You are in slavery leading to death. Or here's another one, especially prominent in our days of social media and virtue signalling. If what really drives you is the desire that other people approve of you, think you're a good person with right opinions, you are in slavery leading to death. Or maybe power is your thing: getting your own way, making people dance around you. It's all slavery, leading to death. At the very best, when you die, it will let you down. You'll think, what was the point of all that? More usually, the way you pursue your goal is *itself* deadly – just making you and others ruined and miserable.

Those in love with money, with approval, with power. We all know those people. Perhaps we *are* those people. You're never more effectively enslaved than when you don't even know it. And remember, if Paul's take on being human is right, *everyone's* enslaved to something. Everyone's got a master, a lord. The only question is whether yours is driving you to death, or

bringing you to glory. Is it something else, or is it Jesus? God says to his people right throughout the Bible: I set before you this day two paths: death, or life. Choose life!

Well, how do you choose life? Three, very simple steps.

Number one, you ask for it. You ask Jesus to be your Lord, to take you into his obedience, and you do that again and again and again. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done – every single day.

Number two, and Romans 6 is really clear on this, you get baptised. In the New Testament, this is what ends your old life and starts the new one; it breaks the old chains and sets your face towards freedom. It's not just a ritual, not just an external thing. Baptism makes new life happen. That's why to Paul the idea of a Christian who wasn't baptised just made no sense.

Number three – again, a daily discipline, indeed a minute by minute discipline. In every single decision we take – as simple as how we speak to our families, as profound as what career we pursue, how we vote, how we spend – in every single decision, remember the bigger decision behind it. What will drive me? Who is Lord in this decision? Is it Jesus – the one who always gives himself away in love for others – or is it something else? Ask yourself that question carefully and honestly and consistently. Be ready to learn uncomfortable things about yourself, and ready to act on them. *Present your members – your hearts, your minds, your imaginations and wallets, everything about you – present your members as slaves to righteousness.* It might be hard. You might not at first want to do it. It goes against the old masters, the ones you were used to, comfortable with. But remember, they did not have your interests at heart. They were leading you to ruin. This way, Jesus' way, the way of giving self away so that others might live – that way lies life. Let us follow it.

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