

Trinity IV (July 5th, 2020)

Rom. 7:14-25

Who's the real Paul?

So I thought, as part of the great campaign to encourage people to come back to church, I'd spend the entire summer preaching on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. That'll pack them in, I thought. There's nothing my people like more than a good dose of St. Paul to set them up for the week. They just can't get enough.

Turns out, I'm mistaken. Chatting to a few of you about St. Paul over the week, and what do I discover? People think he's difficult and convoluted. They don't get what he's on about half the time. He seems severe and fierce, not least when he is being objectionable about women or slavery or gay people. He's complicated, troubled, antagonistic. Conflict broils around him: you can see it in his letters – at one point he even says to his opponents that they should go and castrate themselves. Nor was he great with his friends: we know of at least two blazing rows with Peter and Barnabas. No, Paul certainly seems a prickly, difficult character. Now, settle down to enjoy the next ten weeks or so of sermons about him...

The unattractiveness of Paul is a good way into thinking about today's passage. Think of all the negative judgements you've ever formed or heard about him. Well, Romans 7 is his way of saying: 'it's worse. So much worse. You haven't even scratched the surface of how bad it is.' I am sold into slavery under sin. I know what's right, and I just can't do it. I keep falling back into mistakes and stupidity and ego. I don't understand my own actions, I do the things I hate. Nothing good dwells within me. It's so much worse than you think. I'm a moral and spiritual wreck.

In fact, the picture he paints is *so* stark that there has been a great dispute over how to interpret this passage. Can this really be Paul describing his life *as a Christian*? The Christian life is meant to be one where sure, you might not be morally perfect, but you are morally *growing*. The Spirit has been breathed inside you. As Paul himself says elsewhere, you're being changed from glory to glory, gradually becoming more like Jesus. You're no longer lying beaten, face down in the muck. No, no, some people say, this passage must be Paul looking back at his-pre Christian days. Moral failure belongs *then*, not now.

Well, it's not obvious, and there are fascinating arguments on both sides, but in the end it seems to me there's a good case for saying that this bit of Romans 7 is indeed about the Christian Paul. One simple reason is the tenses. Right up to verse 14, just before our reading begins, all the verbs have been in the past tense. Paul's been talking about life before Christ: his life, and the world's life. In verse 14, the tense suddenly switches to the present: and the most natural reading is that he's talking about *now*, his current Christian existence.

That's an argument from the text, but we also need to think about experience. First of all, the experience of very holy people, those whom we think merit the title 'Saint'. Nearly all of them would tell you that the closer you are to the light, the more you know the darkness. The closer you are to the light, the more you know the darkness. In other words, we might think that someone is indeed a great spiritual figure, close to God, far advanced in the ways of holiness and righteousness. And compared to us, of course, we may well be correct, they *are* all those things. But *compared to us* is irrelevant! They're not called to be better than us – they're called to *be like God*. Put them next to us and they look great; put them next to God, as they do, and they'll look like defeat. Like failure. At best, like match-sticks next to the sun. And they'll say something like Paul: truly, nothing good dwells within me.

That's the experience of the great ones; what about the rest of us? Well, most ordinary Christians do indeed spend a surprising amount of time lying face down in the muck. Some of us do that in more extravagant and spectacular ways than others: caught with their trousers down or their hands in the till. Especially when we dislike them anyway, we point the finger and call such people hypocrites. Which indeed, in a sense, they are. But from God's point of view, there's not much difference between what they've done and – say – thinking poisonous thoughts about others, or self-congratulatory thoughts about yourself. Thank you, God, that I'm not like that person over there: bigoted, backwards, selfish. Thank you that I'm more generous, in mind and spirit and wallet. Think like that, and you are lying right face-down in the muck. And which of us does *not* think like that, on a fairly regular basis?

This is the paradox of Christian life. At baptism, we begin a journey towards sharing in the life of God, towards unspeakable, astonishing glory. And to some degree, that destiny starts now: the Spirit is breathing inside us, and so we expect to see change – real change, those fruits of the Spirit I spoke about back at Pentecost: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness gentleness, self-control. Paul wrote that list, by the way. He knew those things growing inside him. But he also knew where they were choked. Where he wasn't like that, where he was all the opposite, snared and tangled in what he called 'the flesh.'

Incidentally, when Paul says 'flesh', he's not talking about the mere fact that we have bodies, and that bodies have physical urges. That's not the problem. Paul's a good Jew; he believes the body is made by God and good. It is destined for glory. No, the problem is *flesh* – by which he means our whole existence: hearts, minds, souls, bodies – all our members – *when they're turned away from God*. When they're driven by the love of power, by ego, by self-gratification. That's what 'flesh' means and why it's a problem – not that we're physical, but that we're turned away from God.

And what Paul is getting at in Romans 7 is that he finds himself facing in two directions at once. His baptism has set him towards God, growing in the fruits of the Spirit. Yet so much about him is still turned away from God. So much about him – and this is not some young, inexperienced Christian, this is the great Apostle – is still, deeply, turned away from God. This is the paradox of Christian life.

And yet, crucially, it's not a *hopeless* paradox. We come now to the crucial reason for deciding that Romans 7 is indeed describing Paul's *Christian* existence, and not his past. In verse 22, he says, *I delight in the law of God in my inmost self. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self.* There's two important things to note here:

Number one: Paul has spent a lot of time in Romans establishing that before faith and baptism, this is not so. Before God fixes a person, before they are joined to Jesus and breathed in by his Spirit, they do *not* delight in the law of God. Flagrantly or otherwise, knowingly or otherwise, they are in rebellion against it. We can argue about whether that's so another time, but Paul certainly thinks it. So this passage *must* be about after God has put us right. After our lives have been turned, once for all in baptism, from the flesh and towards God.

Number two: Once we've been turned, the 'I' is no longer divided against itself. We shouldn't imagine that there's now a good me, and a bad me, both equally me and wrestling for control. No, Paul is clear: once God has acted, I am not divided. *I delight in the law of God in my inmost self.* My deep down, basic, true identity is one, secure, and stable. Yes, I still sin; yes, there's still conflict – but they are no longer the deepest things about me. They're more like dead skin. Tightly fitting dead skin, admittedly, but dead skin nonetheless. And the day is fast approaching when it will be sloughed off. All that will be left is the real me.

It's easy to hear that as a threat. All that will be left is the real me. Who's the real me, we ask? Who especially is the real me to stand in the presence of God, in the awesome, all consuming fire and light of holiness? Well, here we get to the very heart of Paul's Gospel. Who's the real me? After baptism, not me. Not the one who judges others, not the one who is selfish, not the one who fouls up again and again. Not, Paul might think, the one who helped stone Stephen. Not the one who still boils over, too often, with anger and frustration and violence. That one died. That one ended with my baptism. He's dead skin now, and when he is sloughed off, *I* shall be revealed.

I shall be revealed ... as the one Jesus became one with. As the one Jesus became with one with. That's what the Cross means: Jesus choosing to be with us, in the depths of sin, so that he might become us. So that in us, he might throw our sin off, burn it up like so much rubbish. So that all that is left is us in Him, and He in us. That's what baptism means; that's what communion makes real.

Who's the real *me*? Jesus. Who's the real *you*? Jesus, if you will but ask Him. As Paul put it once, Christ in us, the hope of glory. He has rescued us from ourselves. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.