

Sunday 9th July - readings Romans 7:15-25A, Matthew 11:25-30

Our reading from Romans this morning might seem to make a nonsense of a gospel reading that tells us Jesus' yoke is light. Paul's teaching sometimes seems anything but light, yet it is included in the bible and therefore justifies spending a little time trying to work out what he is saying.

We don't like to talk or think too much about sin, but sin and doing what is contrary to God's will was clearly something Paul felt strongly that the Roman church needed to think about so that they, and in turn, we could understand what the impact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection really was.

Paul's words are preceded by verse 14 which suggest that people who are trying to follow God have been sold into slavery to sin. We have some kind of mixed or dual citizenship, we have been created to do what is right and belong to God's Kingdom but find ourselves bound to doing what is wrong, to not having power over our own actions.

That may seem a bit extreme but I wonder if we honestly reflect on what we do day to day, how much of what we do is the result of a conscious decision to do what is right and how much we just let things happen.

For me, and I suspect for all of us, there are definitely times when it is easier to let things happen just one extra biscuit won't make a difference, I will make that phone call tomorrow, I don't need to visit that person today – does that begin to sound a bit like Paul's 'I do not do the good I want to do'.

I am not suggesting that any of these things in themselves are 'evil' actions but perhaps when we take a slightly critical look at ourselves we can see that maybe there is something that rings true in Paul's words and sin and evil really is right there with us. Not evil in the sense of the big nasty things that make the newspaper headlines, but evil in the creeping sense of selfishness not selflessness, caring more about me than I care about my neighbour, not giving the focus of my attention and actions to God. Paul tells us that this is evidence that we are doing what sin wants us to do.

But for all that sometimes we are weak and realise that the things we are doing are the wrong things, we want to do what is right and good, Paul says that our inner being – whether you call that your heart or your mind or your soul - delights in God's law. He suggests that we want to move to a place where that law is in charge of everything we say and do – the New Living Version of the bible puts verse 18 of our reading like this 'No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't.' I think most of us have moments when things feel that simple, "I want to, but I can't". To use Paul's image, we are living as slaves to what is wrong and not as citizens of God's Kingdom and we are in desperate need of rescue. So what can we do about it, how do we stop living as slaves to what is wrong?

The answer comes right at the end of the passage that we read this morning. Paul asks who can rescue the body that does wrong and is only set for death? And then reminds us of the glorious answer that we have in Jesus. Even though we have been slaves to sin, we can be set free from our slavery. Faith in Jesus and making Him the focus of our thoughts can set us free from our slavery to sin, instead of living in a state of inner conflict where we are trying to serve both the sin we are enslaved to and the God we know is right, we can be accepted back fully into God's kingdom. If we trust in Jesus, he will set us free and we can turn our backs on being slaves to sin and become wholehearted citizens of the kingdom of God.

I am not going to pretend, even after 50 years of faith that this is easy and sometimes I know that I slip back into old habits and don't keep my focus in the right place. That's one of the reasons we meet together like this week by week, so we can together say sorry to God for those slips and receive forgiveness for them before being welcomed to eat together at His table.

One of the hymns that we sing sometimes, based on a poem written in 1863 (by Charitie Lees Smith) sums up beautifully how we can escape from being slaves to sin and find a way to live in God's kingdom....

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea;
A great High Priest, whose Name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.

Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

One with Himself, I cannot die;
My soul is purchased by His blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ, my Saviour and my God.