

Sermon: Life in the Spirit (28th June, 2020)

Certain ideas, certain concepts are so profound that they can radically transform the way we look at the world. Take Copernicus' discovery that the earth orbited the sun, not the other way round. At one level, life continued as normal, just as things always had, but at another level the way we looked at our world could never be the same again. The idea broke apart our previous scientific, astronomical and perhaps even theological frameworks, our ways of understanding the world.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is trying to communicate an idea no less profound, no less challenging of existing beliefs and world views, and indeed something of even greater significance, in terms of our human identity and purpose, and indeed of eternity itself. Like with Copernicus, life at one level, just continues as normal. But at another level, if his ideas are taken on board, they change everything.

In the first verse of our reading this morning, Paul encapsulates in one sentence this earth-shattering concept: "There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That "therefore" takes us back to what he has said in his letter already: that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, have fallen short of God's standards; that all are in need of God's help if we are to be in a right relationship with him; and that in Christ, God does everything to make that possible. We saw last week how Paul uses the images of the law court, of the temple sacrifice, of the paying to liberate a slave, to show how Christ's death and resurrection deal with the punishment of sin and death once and for all.

In other words, there is now no condemnation, no guilty verdict to face, we can come into a life-giving relationship with God, because of what Christ has done.

Paul unpacks the radical implications of this in this passage in two ways: in the impact that it has on how we live and in the impact it has on who we are.

Religion has always placed a high value on moral and ethical living, on holiness and prayerfulness, on religious observance and duty. The Jewish faith from which Christianity sprung, was no different. Central to the Jewish faith was the faithful observance of the Torah, the 613 laws given to Moses, that marked out what holy living looked like. Indeed, much of the distinctiveness, the cultural and religious identity of the Jewish people, came directly from the observance of such laws.

So when Paul begins to assert that simply believing in what Christ has done in his death and resurrection is all that matters - that observing the law is irrelevant to being in relationship with God - this is a massive deal. Not just in the Jewish faith, but in all faiths, humanity has been striving to come closer to God, to find ways of disciplining ourselves, purifying ourselves, making ourselves more worthy of God; and yet in Christ all that is declared irrelevant: God finds a way to come closer to us. Because we fail to reach out to God, he finds a way to reach out to us.

But doesn't that then make our moral and religious behaviour irrelevant? What incentive is there? And, as many of Paul's Jewish readers were asking, what then was the point of the law of Moses in the first place?

Those laws, those actions, may be helpful as additional pointers to God, as additional pointers to living kind and loving lives, but in themselves they are not enough.

The reality is that I fall short. I may intend to always drive at 30 mph in built up areas because that is what the law demands, but whether through ignorance, weakness or my own deliberate fault (to quote the words of our confession liturgy) I don't always do so. And even when I do so, it may not be enough to ensure I am driving with adequate care and attention. What I need is a radical change of heart - a conviction so profound that what I am doing when I drive is so serious, and the implications of getting it wrong so profound - that I will always drive with due care and attention and at a reasonable speed, no matter what the law happens to be.

That radical change of heart is how Paul describes the life of the Spirit as contrasted with the life of the flesh or the sinful nature. Knowing that we have been freed from sin, forgiven by a God of overwhelming grace and abundance, knowing that within us lives the Spirit of God who raised Christ from the dead, marks the beginning of the transformation of our hearts. Grasping that reality should be so profound that the way in which we look at the world and respond to it changes not just us but those around us.

We are empowered by God's Spirit to live a different way, a way less selfish and a way more loving. We are set free to be the life-giving, life-affirming people that we were always meant to be. I wonder what such a life looks like for you today? As we adjust to the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions what does leading a spirit-filled, life-affirming life look like? For many there are real fears. Are we coming out of lockdown too soon? And a loss of confidence - what's it going to be like to start shopping, meeting up with people, again? And for others, a desperate desire to just get back to living life normally again. However we feel, are we seeking to walk in step with God's spirit? Let's take time this week to pray for God's Holy Spirit to fill us, to renew our hearts and minds, that we will live lives of love.

Accepting God's grace in Christ can also have an immeasurable impact on who we are. For, Paul writes, we become "children of God" who can call God "Abba, father". As you may know, that term "abba" is one of great intimacy, a term that may be better translated "daddy", that sense of closeness, trust. A child calling their parent "Father" today conjures up images of a rather austere, distant relationship; a child calling their parent "daddy" conjures up images of a young child totally secure in their father's love.

My German grandfather was a retired Lutheran bishop who always had important guests to the house and important phone calls to make. To others he could sometimes present a somewhat scary appearance. But to me, and his other grandchildren, he was never "gross-vater", but always the more intimate "opa" (granddad). I could always go into his study and sit on his lap, that nothing at that moment seemed more important to him than me, and nothing he was more proud of than me. Extraordinary though it may be, that is how God views us. He longs for us to call him "Abba, daddy", to breathe in the intimacy of his presence and love, to walk into his study as it were and sit on his lap. It is what Christ has made possible.

And not only that, but as children of God we are also his heirs and co-heirs with Christ. This may seem a strange idea, as we are mainly used to thinking about heirs as those who succeed someone when they die, such as the heir to the Queen. But Paul means it here in a different sense: as someone who will share in the rewards of the future. For Paul, our new found relationship with God made possible in Christ, opens up a new future, a future that we will explore more fully next week, a future of a new heaven and a new earth, where creation itself will be restored and rejuvenated, and in which we will be able to participate with life and joy.

And a final word about who we are in Christ. Paul uses the word "adoption": "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption." We have been adopted into God's family. We are not an accident of birth. God has chosen us - He loves us.

Much of the time we can carry round a burden on our shoulders that wonders "Am I good enough? That other person is much more holy, much more prayerful, much more generous - how can God accept me?" Well, as Paul has been hammering home for several chapters now, God does accept us, and reassuringly, its not because of what we have done for him but because of what He has done for us.

If you feel weighed down by guilt or a sense of inadequacy about your Christian life, hear these words again: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Know who you are - loved and chosen by God - and give the holy Spirit free rein to inspire how you live.

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