

Romans 6: 1b-11 – Alive to God in Christ

Prayer

That was not a very easy reading to follow from Romans, was it? Accessible? Not very. And that's true for all this letter, the longest we have from Paul. Incidentally you did know that Paul's letters in the New Testament are arranged in order of length – from the longest Romans to the shortest Philemon? Romans is difficult. When Paul wrote it he had not yet been to Rome and knew few people there personally. He did know it was a significant church at the heart of the Empire; so he wrote it very carefully, crossing all his t's and dotting the l's. It looks like a huge effort to be clear and not to duck awkward questions and issues. Result nearly two thousand years on – a letter that is challenging but rewarding.

To help us, let's go back 500 years plus a few to Germany where a man was having a crisis – an existential crisis in two parts. One had to do with fund raising. The Pope was building in Rome – having built for him, that is – a magnificent church that we know today as St Peter's. Magnificent, yes, and expensive. The Pope was running short of cash and so there was massive fund-raising around Europe. One of the most successful fund-raisers was a Dominican friar called Tetzl and he made a fortune from selling indulgences. These were sold to people whose friends and relatives had died. Presumably they were in Purgatory and buying an Indulgence on their behalf moved them higher up in Purgatory closer to the exit door to heaven. Who wouldn't want that for a loved one? And Tetzl had this advertising jingle:

*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

Now our fellow, along with many others found that crude and offensive and exploitative – rather like the National Lottery in our day, we might think. But our fellow also had an internal crisis; he did not believe he could please God; he could not make himself holy enough, good enough for God. No matter how many Masses he attended, how many times and how scrupulously he made confession, he knew he could not do enough. Now these two things – personal *angst* and indulgences were related. I'll explain how. In the Catholic Church during the late medieval period worked like this – a baby is baptised and all her original sin is washed away and she is given, as it were an injection of grace, which enables her to live in a way that is pleasing to God. But that supply leaks away through sins that we all commit, but it can be topped up by obtaining merit – through being generous, going to Mass, making your confession. When you die it's totted up and only the greatest most holy saints go straight to heaven. Most of us have to go to Purgatory for a time of building up the merit until you have enough to get through the pearly gates. Here on earth you don't know what your score is – and it was this that was giving our fellow agonies along with the crass selling of indulgences that he saw with Tetzl. He found the idea that forgiveness could be bought was abhorrent.

Who am I talking about? Martin Luther. Now Luther's boss in his order of friars told him to go and study Romans. And as he did so his eyes were opened and he realised that he had to rethink. He realised that God does not work in us to make us acceptable to himself by a kind of joint operation - his grace and our co-operation. Rather God simply declares us as sinners to be just and right with God because of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection means our complete salvation and justification. We are made right with God, because in God's eyes we are identified with Jesus. In our section from Romans – *if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him*. In Jesus

Christ, whether I am good or bad, religious or wicked, I am declared righteous – that is in a right relationship with God. All I need to do is to accept that offer, that verdict. That is faith. That turns baptism as it were upside down – back to what Paul was teaching in Romans. Baptism is not God’s injection of grace that we have to keep up with good works. Baptism is a sign of God’s word, declaring the sinner that we all are to be accepted by God in Christ. That does sound quite heavy, but it is wonderfully and gloriously liberating to know that being right with God does not depend on us – it’s absolutely, utterly, and entirely God’s loving gift to us in Jesus.

Here’s another story – at the end of the American Civil War all slaves were set free; slavery was abolished. But many thousands had been slaves, brought up as slaves, slaved as slaves, knew they were slaves. Then overnight they were not slaves and it was really difficult especially for the older ones, who kept forgetting they were free. The world around them didn’t change much, and it was hard for them to consider themselves free. Our last verse in the reading tells us something similar – *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*. What does it mean to be alive to God? We can talk to God knowing that he cares and hears us. We are in God’s plan and purpose for the world – the Holy Spirit lives in us and impels and empowers us to live in a way that is more pleasing to God.

But this means a certain tension in all of us – on the one hand we are being pulled by – let’s be old-fashioned here – the world, the flesh and the devil – in the direction of being proud and self-centred and the bad stuff – what Jesus died to set us free from – and on the other hand pulled and prompted by the Holy Spirit to the good stuff. Yes, that’s an ongoing battle and Paul looks at that in chapter 7.

Now here’s a wicked thought – if it all depends on God and not on us and God delights in forgiving us and making us right with himself, does it matter if indulge in a bit – or a lot of sin? If it brings God lots of glory when he forgives us, let’s give him lots to forgive! Win, win. Not so fast, says Paul. *How can we who have died to sin go on living in it?* When we sin, when we live selfishly, when we are self-centred – we are contradicting what God has made us in Jesus. It’s like when we come to Jesus and accept what he has done for us, God gives us a new passport – citizen of heaven, citizen of the Kingdom of God. And with that comes responsibility – to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Or put it another way – we are set free to be the person God intends us to be.

Now I fear that sometimes we misunderstand that. God loves me and accepts me. Yes. God loves me and accepts me the way I am. Yes. God is perfectly happy with the way I am. No. Our whole passage shows us that God is in the business of transforming us to be the people he intends us to be. We are not fine as we are, and I could say a lot more, but that is how our passage develops beyond the verses we read today. Let me finish with some words from William Tyndale, another of the great men of the Reformation period:

Now go, reader, and according to what you read in Paul, go and do... Remember that Christ did not make atonement (die for us) that you should anger God again; neither did he die for your sins, so you should still live in them; neither did he cleanse you that you should return as a pig unto your puddle of mud again; but that you should be a new creature, and live a new life after the will of God and not of the flesh.

Prayer

The Collect:

God our Saviour, look on this wounded world in pity and in power; hold us fast to your promises of peace won for us by your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Post Communion: :

O God, whose beauty is beyond our imagining and whose power we cannot comprehend: show us your glory as far as we can grasp it, and shield us from knowing more than we can bear until we may look upon you without fear; through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

1. Annabelle is producing an A5 flyer which will be available for each member of the congregation this Sunday. There is no need to go through the flyer in the notices except to encourage people to take it and read through it! We thought that having the occasional paper notices would help people engage.
2. At Tutshill, if Emrys, Charlotte and Mike are in the congregation it would be lovely to invite them to stand or come forward and present them to the church and pray for them. Emrys is being baptised on Sunday 2 July and Charlotte and Mike are being confirmed on Sunday 9 July. Please encourage all 3 congregation to come and support them.
3. Regarding the confirmation, 3pm on Sunday 9 July. We are having a little afternoon tea after the service with +Robert. Might there be people willing to provide some light bites... finger food? Hospitality!! Please let Nicholette know if you can help.
4. Massive thanks for the money and food which has been provided to help those struggling financially at this time.