

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 5TH JULY 2020

Ordinary 14A

READINGS: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-67; Romans 7:15-25a & Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

One thing that I really admire about the apostle Paul is his unflinching honesty about himself. We see it in today's reading from Romans, but also in other writings where he talks about his experiences. He is not afraid to admit failure. And he doesn't hesitate to own up when he realises he may have overstepped the mark or mucked up. Nor does he hesitate to own his struggles both with his treatment by others, but also his own internal struggles. And it is his own internal struggles that he delineates in today's reading.

In these verses he lays out for the reader his own internal battles as he finds himself doing things that his conscience has told him clearly that he should not do. He gets extremely frustrated as he finds that he does the wrong thing despite his own best intentions. He wants to be strong and disciplined, but finds that he is weak. He evidently set himself high targets, but he doesn't always reach them. In fact he sometimes finds himself doing the exact opposite of what he set out to do.

When he does this he's like the dieter who sets out to strictly follow a low kilojoule diet and avoid all junk food but somehow finds themselves, in a weak moment, eating chocolate or chips.

Or he's like the person who makes a resolution not to argue with their teenage child or their wife or husband or their aggravating neighbour but before they know it they find themselves caught up in another unedifying slinging match.

Or he's like someone who is trying to give up their grudges, but finds themselves whingeing about the usual litany of complaints.

Or he's like the person who's always putting others down or acting in a superior fashion or being a know-it-all or being bossy, and who knows that they need to change but keeps finding themselves slipping back into their bad habit.

I'm sure you can add your own examples either of things that you see others do or that you do yourself that you know that you shouldn't have done.

I think if we are honest that we would have to own that all of us are guilty of that at times. We don't all share the same weaknesses, but we all share the fact that we all have weak and vulnerable areas, and that sometimes we are weak, and we succumb to old destructive patterns and habits and we act badly. Sometimes we hurt others, sometimes we hurt ourselves, and sometimes we hurt God.

We get trapped in destructive cycles. We get trapped in our own failures. We get trapped in greed or anger or hate or prejudice or a failure to be able to forgive or in pride or arrogance or mean spiritedness or bitterness or whatever our vulnerable spot is. And we find it incredibly hard to let go.

We are like monkeys who get caught by hunters who lock bananas in small cages. I know it sounds a little weird, but apparently it works very effectively. What happens is that hunters leave small bunches of bananas in the small cages and then lock the cages. The monkeys see and smell the bananas and reach in through the bars to grab a banana. They can grab a banana easily, but what they can't do is get the banana out through the narrow gaps between the bars. But so determined are they to have the bananas that they won't let go even when the hunters come, and so they are captured.

We, too, get caught. We get caught in sin. We, like Paul, find ourselves doing the things which we don't want to because we get caught up in destructive patterns and can't seem to change our ways. Just like the monkeys who can't make themselves let go of the bananas, we get caught in sin and wrong behaviour. We know we shouldn't, but we do.

What are we to do? Give up? Get angry with ourselves? Resign ourselves to failure? Despair?

No! No! No! None of these. Then what are we to do?

Firstly, we are to remember that Paul's confession of his failures doesn't end where today's reading ended. For Paul goes on to proclaim that for those who are in Christ Jesus (those who have faith in him) there is no condemnation because through Jesus Christ God forgives our sin.

As the gospel reading reminds us, Jesus has a very loving heart and wants to help us rather than punish us. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," (Matthew 11:28-30) says Jesus.

But note, there is that 'learn from me' in that verse which indicates that Jesus doesn't want us to be stuck there. There is the need also to change, but change through the help of God.

For, as Paul reminds us in the next chapter of Romans, God's Holy Spirit is with us to strengthen and guide us. Through the power of the Spirit, God can help us change and be renewed and overcome. We do need to seek this help and be willing to change, and even then we will often find it difficult because old habits become ingrained. But God's grace is immense, and God's guidance is there for us through the Holy Spirit. So that we can be changed to become more Christ like, though we will never reach perfection in this life.

After all, even the saints of the church, including Paul, were flawed people (some were even quite strange) and God used them (and worked upon them). Among the saints whose feast days are celebrated in July are St Thomas on July 3rd and St Mary Magdalene on July 22 – they both feature in an old poem whose words are rather corny, and the rhymes are forced, but the message is strong:

St. Matthew was a taxman;

St. Dismas was a thief;

Mary Magdalene had demons;

Tom was without belief.

Yet there they are in heaven,

looking down upon us now,

holding up their holy hands

to their tired and weary brow.

So the sins of all us sinners

don't necessarily condemn:

the wasness doesn't matter,

if your isness really am.

What we have done wrong does not exclude us from the people of God, for God's forgiveness and love is there for us as long as we are willing to repent. And God will change us and help us to become the people God has called us to be, all through God's grace and love.

A grace and love that we are reminded of in that great hymn 'Amazing Grace' written by Isaac Newton the slave trader whose life was utterly turned around and changed by God's grace. God forgives. God gives strength and new direction. God changes us. Thanks be to God.

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