

Romans 8. 1 – 11

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Matthew 13. 1 – 9 & 18 – 23

Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Reflection

It seems oddly appropriate to be considering the opening verses of Chapter 8 from Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome on this first weekend in July. It is the weekend – unless you live in the city of Leicester that is – on which the lockdown regulations that have condemned us to staying at home, if at all possible, for the past three months are relaxed. As a result, people have re-discovered the freedom or release of getting a haircut or having a drink in a pub – albeit socially distanced or other protective measures. This freedom has been withheld from us by the government with the aim of restricting the spread of Coronavirus. Yet despite this, over 44,000 people have lost their lives to the virus. This freedom has been restored to us because the government judges that we have made sufficient progress in the battle against the virus. However, the pictures on the new and the BCC website from Saturday clearly show that a large number of people can't handle that freedom.

Chapter 8 of Paul's Letter follows on from Paul, in Chapter 7, discussing the effect of the Law – the Torah – on human beings showing their inability to obtain life and health through that Law and so

being condemned by sin to spiritual death. It opens with the bold statement “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (verse 1). This statement or proclamation of release comes like a trumpet call that demands our attention.

If, as Paul tells us elsewhere “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3.23), the obvious question is ‘how is this possible?’ The answer is almost unbelievable – through Christ. God – the same God who would have to condemn us because of our sins – sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to take on human flesh. We celebrate this act of love at Christmas. In taking on our flesh – in becoming just like us in our fallen state – Jesus did not, however, leave his divine nature behind. On the contrary, the Jesus revealed to us in the Gospels and written about in the rest of the New Testament, was both fully human and fully divine – without conflict or diminishing either nature.

But taking on our human flesh was not the ultimate purpose – it was rather a means to an end. That same Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full (John 10.10). But for that to happen, God needed to be able not to look at our sin and count it against us. To make this possible, Jesus went to the cross – as an unblemished and totally pure sin offering – taking away the sins of the world (John 1.29) by taking that sin upon himself. On the cross, he became sin for us so that sin might be condemned in him and not in us. He took the punishment that should rightly have been ours. Therefore, Paul proclaims, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ...” (verse 1).

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed about making sin offerings when they broke the Law. These culminated in the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day, the High Priest would select two goats. Over one he would pray before it was driven out into the desert taking the sins of the nation with it – the original scapegoat. The other was then ritually sacrificed in the Temple and its blood taken into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the nations. Of course, this sacrifice had limited effect – and had to be repeated each year. Jesus came to be our scapegoat. He took the place of that annual sacrifice but did so once and for all in the offering of himself for our sins. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our Great High Priest who has passed through the veil of heaven and sits at the right-hand of the Father to intercede for us on the basis of the sacrifice that he made. As a result, God does not look on our sins and condemn us. Rather he looks on the sacrifice of Jesus – that wholly acceptable sin offering – and finds us blameless in his sight. But only if we have truly accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Marvellous as this statement is, we should also note that the statement is in the present tense. That means that this is the state of play now – not at some point in the future (although that is true as well). We are not left in some sort of limbo having been promised eternal life and forgiveness of sins in the future in a way that implies that it could be taken away or that we can’t rejoice in that forgiveness now. The medieval church believed in a state of purgatory after we die – whilst there we were left to work our way out of sin and be made clean before we could join the saints in heaven. Paul wants us to clearly understand that the ‘no condemnation’ won for us on the cross by Jesus Christ is available to us in the here-and-now because it has been secured by his death on the cross. That death, however, only has significance for us if we accept, through faith, that Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God who redeemed us by the shedding of his blood – the ultimate sin offering. If we can’t make that step of faith, Jesus’ death on the cross has no meaning. That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen – it just means that for us it doesn’t have any meaning.

There is absolutely nothing that we need to – or indeed can – do to make it effective. We cannot earn or deserve this lack of condemnation – it is ours through God’s good grace. The only thing that we need to do is to find the faith to claim Christ as our Lord and Saviour. When we do that, God the Holy Trinity – through the power of the Holy Spirit – will come and dwell within us. This is not to say that any of our deeds are worthless. In one, of course, that is true in the sense that they are not going to change anything because we are not saved for eternal life by them. However, they are, if you like, a sign or a symbol of our faith. If we are filled with faith and the Holy Spirit of God, then that faith – as the Apostle James points out – has to be a living faith and if we have a living faith then we will live that faith by loving our neighbour as ourselves as Jesus commanded us.

It is, perhaps then, no wonder then that Paul brings Chapter 8 of his Letter to the Church in Rome to a close with these words “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8.38 – 39). His comments about life in the Spirit are thus bracketed with two statements that remind us that the love of God that sent Jesus to be our sin offering is so strong that it not only did that but also can withstand anything – even the best efforts of the Evil One or Satan, to tear us away from our Creator and Redeemer.

Bearing this in mind, how should we live? The ‘simple’ answer is to say that it all depends what we focus our attention on. If we allow ourselves to focus on the pleasures of this world – money, sex, power, etc – then we are living in a way that denies the eternal life for which Jesus redeemed us through his blood shed on the cross. Those things can only ever lead to spiritual death. If, on the other hand, we allow the Spirit of God to be at work within us and to focus our attention on the things of God – of his Kingdom – then these things will lead us to the eternal life that Jesus won for us. We need to make a choice – probably every minute of every day. Will we be people of the Holy Spirit or people of the world. We can’t do both – it is an either or and not both. If we choose the first, then like Paul, we can truly – regardless of what ever we may face – declare that “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (verse 1)

I pray that we – whatever we are facing – may cling to our faith in God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and rejoice that through that faith “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” and live our lives in the light of that glorious truth. Amen

May God put his blessings upon you day by day.

Rupert