

5th Sunday Trinity

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

9th July 2023

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There stands in the innermost secret corner of our hearts, a recognition that we are not our own. It can be an uncomfortable sensation to acknowledge this, for each of us has an instinctive desire to be our own person. After all, we are the ones experiencing ourselves. We are the ones who wake up and see our faces in the mirror each morning, we are the ones who have those tasks ahead of us each day which are ours to perform; whether they be as mundane as pouring the right amount of milk into our tea or chores to be done around the home and garden, books to read, films to watch, and friends and family to call or visit.

We live our lives and yet behind the comfort of our self determination lingers an existential *something* which reminds us that we are not entirely our own. Where we would rather be the main character in our own stories, something reminds us that we are but players on a larger stage, who find their place in a greater story.

That this story has been called 'the greatest story ever told' doesn't perhaps reassure us because every story ever told happens 'out there'. Either it's a fictitious story and the events are at best imaginary or at worst depicted in novels or on netflix, or it's the account of something - or things - which have happened to others; perhaps it's history, Henry the 8th and his wives or closer to home the Men of Penn who died in the war. Perhaps it's sporting; we remember the world cup of 96, the olympic achievements of Bolt, Coe, Duplantis¹ or Redgrave, amongst many others. Perhaps it's political, scientific, technological or even musical; we live in a world which is filled with stories but which are rarely our own stories. And even for those whose lives fill the column inches of the daily papers or are the subjects of tweets, videos, articles and documentaries; the representations of 'their story' are in truth still distinct from their experience of living that story.

So it is for each of us, we may be known by one another here but we are here not so much because we enjoy each other's company but rather because we recognise in our hearts that we are not entirely our own.

¹ Armand Duplantis is a Swedish Athlete who is the world record holder for the Pole Vault.

The sense of this is what Paul is touching on in Romans 7 when he writes of the experience that although we know what we want to do and the kind of people we want to be, we find ourselves being somehow not that kind of person and doing those things which are not aligned with what we hope or intend.

It can be tempting to make analogies of discipline here; I want to be healthier and so I will not eat that cake, but man that cake was tasty! Or I should make time today to go for a walk or a run or a dance, but somehow it is the evening and I have done anything but walk, run, or dance. The same could perhaps be suggested of prayer.

Yet to make this a question of discipline is to hide from a deeper reality. Paul is not saying that he is ill disciplined. He is pointing to the reality which last week's collect reminded us of when it says: without you O Lord nothing is strong, nothing is holy. There's a sense that we cannot of our own volition be the holy people we know we ought to be.

Paul goes one step further in the verse immediately prior to our reading:

we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

Later, at the end of our Romans reading in verses 20-24:

Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present within me, the one who wills to do good...² But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (R 7:20-24)

In this Paul identifies our tangible experience of the implicit infection within the human condition which theologians call 'original sin'. That which I have described as the "seemingly inevitable and barely perceptible engine of entropic decay which results from reality not being rightly aligned with its divine creator".³ That is, that we are born into a reality which is "spiritually off kilter" and as such affects, whether we wish it to or not, every area of our lives.

It is here that we discover ourselves to be not simply players in a larger story, but indeed the very stage upon which that story plays out. There is a spiritual conflict over our souls and bodies.

We are not our own, but whose shall we be?

² Omitting verse 22 for brevity

³ Sermon for 3rd Sunday after Trinity, on HT&SM website.

Sin and the devil desire that we should remain in captivity even as we delight in what we have tasted of the goodness of God. Yet although we desire God, we truly desire to do good, we find that we are incapable of our own strength to actually perform the good which we desire. As such even our efforts to do good are doomed to fail; are doomed to be, as Paul rightly says, doomed to be evil. We are captives to sin.

This is a lamentable situation to be in. Paul cries out:
“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord”! (R 7:25)

For this is the Gospel, the Good News; the greatest story ever told: we are not the heroes of our own stories, for God himself is our saviour!

In Matthew’s Gospel we have heard from the lips of Jesus himself the reality of our salvation which he was to win for us by his death upon the Cross and his resurrection from the grave.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants, yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” (M 11:25)

Our remedy begins with the gracious will of God the Father to reveal himself to whom he shall make himself known.

This he does through Jesus Christ his only Son, to whom he has given over all things. *“No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”* (M11:27)

This is sensational when we reflect on what it means. God the Father is known only by Jesus Christ, his Son. This relationship is as private and intimate within the heart of God as our experience of ourselves within our own hearts.

And yet Jesus can open up within the heart of God space to invite others to share in his own experience of the eternal love of God the Father for his only son, such that, as John says elsewhere, *he can give to those who believe in his name, the right to become Children of God: who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* (J 1:13)

Not only can Jesus open up this invitation to us, but in opening his arms in love for us upon the cross he makes there - in the midst of his full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world - he makes there an invitation to share in the eternal love and knowledge of God.

An invitation to taste the promise of life beyond death, of righteousness beyond sin, of goodness beyond evil such that grounded on his everliving resurrection life we can have the power to be who we are truly called to be.

In the name of Jesus we are forgiven, in the name of Jesus we are healed, in the name of Jesus we are set free for his eternal glory, living by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, within the love of God the Father for his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the invitation:

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. (BCP)

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (NKJV)

Let us open the ears of our hearts and in our innermost being let us be comforted and strengthened by these words. In a short while when we make our confession to God that we fail to do the good which we desire to do, and we do the evil which we desire not to do and that the burden of these things are intolerable, let us hear these words of Christ Jesus our Lord and be assured of our salvation:

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. (BCP)

For we are not our own, but belong to Christ who has won our souls for God that we might no longer be captives to sin, but be led by the Spirit to be children of God.

“Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (R 7:25)
Amen.