



Romans 8.5-11
John 11.32-44
26th March 2023 Lent 5

Early Easter

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

Last Christmas, Pip, our little dog, became so fixated with a wrapped present in a pile got ready for the 25th, that we opened it early for her. It was a plastic rubber duck from Vienna with a Mozart face. She was obsessed by its shape and smell.

Some presents, especially Secret Santa ones, rarely make it to the 25th as Christmas comes early and they are opened at the Works Do a week or so before.

Our Gospel reading this morning, the resurrection of Lazarus, means on this the 5th Sunday of Lent it feels a bit like Easter come early. A village in mourning and a family in sorrow experience hope and new life, themes we'll be exploring here on Easter Day in just a few weeks' time.

Now this theme of living a new life, one in which something of the resurrection Spirit of Jesus fills us every day, is taken up by St Paul in the other set reading for this Sunday. It's these verses from Romans 8 verses 5 and 6: *Those who live on the level of the old nature have their outlook formed by it and it spells death. But those who live on the level of the spirit have the spiritual outlook, and that is life and peace.*

The Bible often presents us with choices. And we are not let off the hook. Life isn't pre-determined in that sense. WE make the choices.

So, we have Jesus talking about two pathways, one broad and one narrow; which one do we take? He told a story of someone who built a house on sand, whilst his neighbour built one on rock. A story about foundations; which one do we choose? And, of course, especially at this time of year, in Lent, we recall Jesus in the Wilderness who, three times had to make a choice. A choice between the ways of self-promotion or serving others.

And because all of us develop belief systems that are products, to a certain extent, of our lived experience, I suspect that Paul, as he writes the letter to The Romans especially, is conscious that in the early part of his life he made choices

that resulted in him becoming an angry and aggressive religious fanatic. He lost sight of the love of God and seems to have justified to himself that using violence was OK in forcing his beliefs onto others. In those days he was called Saul and after his Damascus Road encounter he chooses to leave that old way. But I don't think he ever forgot it. He learnt from it as he strove to find his better self, one based not in power over people but love for people.

So, there is an added complication thrown in the mix here and it's the reality that it's not enough just to say I'm religious, as if that's an end to having to make choices. Because sometimes, perhaps even often, religion can make people intolerant of others and extreme in their views.

That's why Paul writes as he does in Romans, and sometimes his writing in this book of the Bible seems complicated and dense. Yet it always has to be read against his own back story. So, in today's verse his take is this. There is a way of thinking, maybe even religious thinking, that leads to death. And there is another way, and it too is based on faith, yet it has a different emphasis, and that way leads to life. So, Paul presents two ways. He's asking us to make a choice.

A few years ago I was speaking to a member of a large church in Birmingham, a church which had just appointed a new Senior Minister. Although I expected this to be a happy conversation, full of hope for the future after a long Pastoral Vacancy, I was taken aback by the sense of certainty my friend expressed.

She said: *We've not only found the right minister, but he's got a roadmap that tells us how to get to a better future.*

Golly, I thought! I wonder where they sell those maps! Sadly, he didn't stay too long or take them to much of a future.

We can have these, we might call them, *transactional* ideas. If we do this, appoint him or her, take this path, then x,y and z will happen and we'll be blessed. It's as certain and predictable as that. And some people love certain and predictable faith.

We might even have such an idea of a *transactional* relationship with God. If we obey this or that bit of the law, keep all the Commandments, go to all the services, then I'll be safe. Life will be good. I've kept my part of the bargain, the transaction, and now it's up to God to keep his.

Maybe this was the sort of thinking Paul is pulling away from in Romans. A legalistic, transactional view of faith.

He's presenting us with two mindsets or two pathways through life. One is

focussed on our own efforts, but in the other we live with a more open heart, one that finds its energy in the love around and within us.

The language experts tell us that verses 5 and 6 of Romans 8 contain no verbs. That makes them, in modern speak, rather like bullet point lists. The first mindset has these bullet points: *Body, Death and Sin*. The second list, obviously the one Paul is advocating is: *Spirit, Life and Goodness*.

So, that first way of thinking, in Paul's book has a lot to do with feeling very self-sufficient and self-made. And perhaps in a religious context, and maybe this is auto-biographical for Paul, that means thinking *I've kept the rules, I'm the keeper of the rules and these are the rules*.

Now that's often the reputation of religion. It's a set of rules, and religious people are essentially rule keepers.

Paul doesn't speak like that here. For him living in the spirit of Resurrection isn't like that.

Remember those bullet points, for Paul Easter Morning People opt for the *Spirit, Life and Goodness* mindset.

And that means dropping that sense that I can be self-made and self-sufficient if only I keep all the rules. It means acknowledging our frailty and turning, in a relational rather than transactional way, to God.

I know it's in old fashioned language but it's about having the attitude found in that old hymn with the line: *Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling*.

Think of the story of resurrection found at Bethany. Lazarus is surrounded by sisters who love him, a village that mourns for him and a friend in Jesus who sheds tears for him. The Resurrection Spirit found in today's gospel is the Spirit of Love that sees hope and life reborn.

And this, says Paul, is the new way of thinking I found on the road to Damascus. It was the moment in my life when I turned from my self sufficiency and finally opened my heart up to love.

If a rules based faith seems attractively secure, one based on love is often unpredictable. To choose this mindset is to take a risk.

To journey through Lent is to, as it were, travel with Jesus on his last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. It's one on which he constantly blurs the edges with his own version of risky love.

The story of Jesus begins with shepherds and wise men, characters from the margins surprisingly thrust into the limelight. It continues as our Lord welcomes children, outcasts and the sick.

Jesus lived with a provocative love which many found difficult to understand. Perhaps they were so used to a faith with sharp, clearly defined edges, yet Jesus advocates boundaries that are always weighted towards welcome, they are, therefore, necessarily ambiguous and flexible.

And this is the Spirit of Resurrection that we inherit, the Spirit of Jesus.

And maybe that feels risky for us.

Yet this mindset, described by Paul using those bullet points of *Spirit, Life, Goodness*, isn't a denial of the wisdom found in ancient scriptures such as the Ten Commandments or the call of the prophets to let justice roll down like the waters. Rather it reinvigorates those truths and constantly posts them to a new address. Rather than let such wisdom fossilise this Spirit of Resurrection infuses it so that it becomes a Living Word.

So, two mindsets are before us.

One focuses on us and all we might achieve. The other looks to the Spirit of Resurrection and how we might live with the love of God at the centre of our being.

One might appear safe and predictable. The other risky and constantly challenging.

For a time, Paul had lived the first but in Romans he writes as a practitioner of the second.

So, although this may seem liturgically chaotic to say on the fifth Sunday of Lent, but, hay, I'm a Non-Conformist!- may the Spirit of Easter fill our lives this Lent in the name of God, whose life and love always brings hope and new beginnings. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 24th March 2023