



Revd Ro's Reflection on Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 8

Year A

Romans 6.12-23

Matthew 10.40-42

I have said before that one of my favourite television dramatisations was of 'The Choir' by Joanna Trollop. It deals with a dean's aim to abolish the cathedral choir thus acquiring the money it costs to run it to mend the roof. It is a superbly made series. It also deals with an ex chorister who has really lost his way in life. At one point he is invited to have tea with the dean and meets his 'nightmare children.' Cosmo is about 16 and has been expelled from school for as the dean puts it, 'anarchy, barbarism and lawlessness.' They are both rebelling against their father and are indulged by their mother.

This came to mind as I read our passage for this week from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul is referring to the anarchy which had been the norm for many of these new Christians in their former lives. 'The Choir' is also about right winning over might. At one point the dean and chapter are about to vote so that the dean gets his own way. One of the canons has this to say, 'You and I are about to be heavily outvoted, but before we are I should like to make one thing clear, ours is the truly Christian way, therefore we are right and no amount of voting can change that!' He has the courage to stand up for right against all the odds. In the end the headmaster is victorious and the choir is saved. In our readings Paul makes it clear that there are two ways to go, but only one is the way of Christ.

Jesus famously said, Matthew 6.24 'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.' Here Jesus is talking about God and money but it holds true for our reading. Keep these two analogies in mind as we look at the passage. It follows from last week and we remember that Paul put baptism at the centre. This is what came immediately prior to our passage,

⁹ 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.' (Romans 6)

This is the central point. Christ conquered sin on Calvary. He conquered death at his resurrection. If you are a Christian then you will have eternal life with him by the grace of God. But Christ made a covenant with us. A Christian promises to turn from sin and turn to Christ; it is a central baptismal promise. This is St. Paul's central argument, Christ died for you and you must turn from the old ways to put on the garment of Christ. That is why Paul begins our passage with the word therefore, what follows after is dependent upon what went before.

¹² 'Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Paul stresses that anarchy, barbarism and lawlessness might have been the old way but not now! There are two masters, we see this illustrated in the scenes of temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted by the devil, i.e. evil. The tempter says, 'If you serve evil and turn from God you will get power and wealth and control over everyone, but you have to be enslaved to evil. Jesus turns his back on that,

⁵ 'Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." ' (Luke 4)

This is St. Paul's point, previously they could do as they wished, and immoral behaviour is the order of the day. Individual gratification dictates behaviour. Not anymore says Paul, you have turned your back on all that when you turned to Jesus, you cannot have it both ways.

¹⁵ 'What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?' Paul is using a human analogy to make his point, as he says later,

¹⁹ 'I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.'

We find the idea of slavery difficult and rightly so. However Paul is making it clear that immoral behaviour and sin of all kinds leads to death. It is the truth that people become the slaves of certain types of behaviour, drug abuse or sexual immorality or dishonesty to name but a few. Sin becomes a way of life even an addiction, soon people do become enslaved to it. There cannot be two masters. You have chosen who to serve and it must be with a whole heart, there is no half-heartedness in the teaching of Christ.

It is easier if we use the word serve when we talk of God as our master. Obedience to the teaching of Christ is what is required. Jesus was obedient to his Father even to the point of death. If God is our master then our lives must be ruled by him, we must be obedient to him and his teaching in our own lives. That means of course that expediency and doing what we want are not acceptable. Too

many times people profess Christianity then do what they want to serve their own power seeking and ambition. No, says Paul, there is no half and half, your commitment must be complete.

At our baptism we metaphorically rise from the water washed clean from sin in the Holy Spirit of God. We make baptismal promises and we become soldiers of Christ. Our battle is with sin and evil and anything that is not in tune with Christ's teaching we must fight against. That means standing up for right even when that is not popular, even when we are persecuted for it. Jesus says, 'Anyone who wants to be my disciple must take up his cross daily.' That is so true, not only in lands where persecution is the norm but in our everyday lives.

Now, says Paul, through baptism you enter into the priesthood of God's holy people, you have been washed clean from sin by the death of Jesus.

¹⁷ 'But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸ and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.'

You have been taught of Jesus Christ, you have turned your back on that old behaviour. No one made you; it was your choice to adopt this new way of life, Christ's way. Christ is your master, he is your Lord. Now you serve him and only him. Jesus is the second person of the trinity; he is the God who is love. Your behaviour must be attuned to the way of Christ. Christianity cannot be watered down or it ceases to be Christianity. Sadly too many people seek to do just that.

¹⁹ ... 'For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.'

Once your bodies and minds were enslaved to sin, now you are freed through the blood of Christ. Now your bodies are a temple for the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, 'I am with you even to the end of the age.' He breathed the Holy Spirit on to his disciples in the upper room. The Holy Spirit descended on the followers at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends upon each one of us at our baptism. We know that the Holy Spirit is within us, so then we conform to that wonderful truth in our behaviour. We remember 'God with us.'

Now Paul comes to the central point,

²⁰ 'When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death.

²² But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

What did you gain from sin? Death and shame was your reward. But now as Christians you receive the gifts of God's grace. Jesus won forgiveness of sin, he won salvation for us. He united us in a loving relationship with God. We are children of God and co-heirs with Christ. Jesus won eternal life for all who follow him. In Christ everything is changed and we must be newly created people with Christ's values following his ways not our selfish ways. We know in death we will be united with Christ and in God's time we will be citizens in his newly recreated order. Our behaviour has to reflect that. Jesus requires us to live as new people now and throw off the old ways. We may think we don't go around sinning, but sin is insidious. Wanting our way and twisting Christianity to get it is sin. We all need to stop, examine our lives and decisions and ask, 'What would Jesus do?'

You cannot serve two masters. It is as true now as it was for Paul's audience 2000 years ago.

June 29th is Peter tide and on the nearest Sunday to that new deacons are ordained. I celebrated twenty years as an ordained minister this June. I can remember that service as if it was yesterday. I can remember the elation as I walked down the aisle of Lichfield Cathedral and thinking of all those who had walked that way before me and what a privilege it was. The archdeacon who preached put a parcel under each of our seats and in his sermon we were told to open them. It was a simple white towel. 'Never forget you are servants of the servant who washed the feet of twelve poor men,' he said. I never have forgotten nor the words bishop Keith had said to me earlier, 'Welcome aboard Rowan, you are freed to serve.' At that service the bishop asks a number of questions and the commitment we made was, 'With the help of God we will.' We are never alone and we can walk in the strength of God who is always at our side. It is the same for those first disciples.

Jesus is sending out the twelve, they are as 'sheep among wolves.' Never expect that being a Christian is easy. Service is tough. The Jews were set in their ways; they thought they had it right with God. To preach the new way of Christ took courage and the path would not be easy. Certainly after Jesus' death they would face horrific persecutions. This is why Jesus tells the truth and tells them what they are to expect. But they go out with his authorisation and the Spirit of God he tells them will give them the words. They must not fear, they are not alone. Jesus brings the good news of the new way of God; he is the one who ushers in that new way. He is the Anointed One to whom all the scriptures have pointed. Now is the time to turn from the old way and turn to him as Lord.

³⁹ 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

(Matthew 10)

There is a warning of real danger here. They will have to expect persecution; Jesus' followers down the ages will suffer and die. But they will win the eternal crown of life with him. Jesus brings eternal life to humanity; he brings forgiveness of sins for all who truly turn to him. Now is the time for the disciples to begin their new life of service.

⁴⁰ 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;' (Matthew 10)

This is the authorisation, they are sent out in the name of Christ. Just as God is in Jesus so Christ is in his followers. If a person welcomes them they welcome Christ, if they turn their back then they reject Christ. We know Jesus has said the time is short and indeed it is. Go then in my name, tell the good news and offer the chance of salvation. Those who accept the word will receive the full promises of God. The eternal reward is theirs. It may be that their audience will only have this one chance. There is no coercion with God, he knocks, it is up to us to welcome him in.

⁴² 'and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

Here Jesus is talking about service. 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

The cup of cold water underlines this. This is how we are to treat others, service is the key note just as the archdeacon and Bishop Keith stressed. Compassion and love for others is Christ's way, now it must be ours. Jesus gives the new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' We know how much Christ loved; he gave his life for humanity to win eternal life. This must be the hallmark of every Christian to serve one another. Christ is in every person, this is something we may not often

remember but to the Celtic Christians it was central. Christ is in all people so to serve another is to serve Christ.

We pray for all those ordained into a life of service and for ourselves as we turn from sin and turn to Christ.

So let us learn how to serve, and in our hearts enthrone him; each other's needs to prefer for it is Christ we're serving. Graham Kendrick

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