

Romans 7:15-25 HT 5.7.2020

Can you cast your mind back to the beginning of lockdown? Some of you, as key workers, looked ahead to a time of being busier than ever. But many of us saw much of our normal life vanish and we looked forward to lots of extra time but being stuck at home. Some of us imagined sorting our homes out, reading all those unread books and getting out board games and jigsaws. My family started to get into Joe Wicks' PE sessions together. I have to admit to being the slowest to get started and the most ready to find reasons not to do it. It is now several weeks since I last put on my shorts and tee shirt to do squats, burpees and press ups in front of the television. The mystery is that I know the exercises do me good, I know I feel better and have a clearer mind afterwards and I enjoy feeling fitter -and yet, it is so easy to find an excuse to put it off for yet another day.

To anyone who is feeling disappointed with themselves about failed goals or ambitions today's passage reminds us of a human reality. We know what is good, we know what is right, we know what we want to do – but yet we end living below our own standards. If you ever feel disappointed about not being the person you want to be – or giving up on what you know would make your's or someone else's lives, better – then Paul brings you hope in our reading today.

Can you imagine a better Christian than Paul – absolutely dedicated to following Jesus with every fibre of his being – willing to face beatings, shipwreck and imprisonment so that he can share the gospel wherever he goes - Even when in prison he saw it as God's opportunity to proclaim the gospel to his captors – and through them to the Roman institutions.

So our reading comes as something as a shock. Here is this great model of faith in practice talking honestly about his struggle with doing the wrong things. Not that he is pleading ignorance – but rather wrestling with a mystery which has been grappled with through history:

Paul's contemporaries well knew this feeling, as, indeed, we know it ourselves. Seneca talked of "our helplessness in necessary things." He talked about how men hate their sins and love them at the same time. Ovid, the Roman poet, had penned the famous tag: "I see the better things, and I approve them, but I follow the worse."

Paul was wrestling with what felt to him to be two natures at war in his own being – on the one side he knew what was right and wanted to do it – on the other hand he found himself attracted by the very things he shouldn't do.

He doesn't elaborate – and that's perhaps a good thing – the things that attract and bind us are different but the experience is universal – we know and approve of what is right – and yet find ourselves doing the one thing we determined not to do.

Some of us are fortunate – the things we do wrong are viewed as minor by the world – others are less fortunate and the things that attract and bind them cause harm – or offense to themselves or others. I wonder if you have ever been puzzled by the power of criticism of those who can't shake free from addictions and the anger directed at them

It is often the case that we are least tolerant of the things we struggle with ourselves and perhaps all of us can see how close we all are to being the addicted.

So from the depths of seeing his own wretchedness Paul offers three key hopes:

1. The fact that we see the sin as wrong shows the work of God in us – if we were hardened to sin – the fact that we do it would not be a problem – just something we would take pleasure in it. So Paul

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encourages us that whenever we feel that sense of despair that once again we have let God or ourselves down – that in itself is evidence that God hasn't given up on you – and his Spirit is still at work challenging you and pointing you forwards.

2. Jesus has delivered you from the consequences of your sin. If you are in Jesus then you share not just in his death but also in his resurrection. The theological word “Justified” which applies to all Christians has been correctly defined as “Just as if I'd never sinned.

3. The power of the spirit at work in us can set us free from the greatest bonds which tie us down. In Jesus there is the power to defeat sin and be released from whatever temptation it is that holds you in its grasp. When Wesley wrote “MY chains fell off, my heart was free!” he understood the power of God to bring us freedom.

So when we feel the despair of failing ourselves and God again take heart – the fact that you despair show God hasn't given up on you – you can come and be cleansed at the cross and in Jesus there is power to overcome – if he hasn't dealt with that which is bothering you – it may well be that there is some other aspect of your life which he is dealing with first – be patient with yourself – he is patient with you.