

Romans 8:12-25 HT & St. W am 20.7.14

On Friday year 6 at Heworth managed to get into school to mark the end of their time at Heworth. As I looked at photo's of them I remembered my own children each, in turn, leaving Heworth at the end of year 6. Although they left Heworth – Heworth never fully left them and they all acknowledge that who they are now is partly a consequence of the fact that they are Heworth alumni. It is part of who they are and shapes their lives even now,

Today we continue mining some of the wonderful nuggets from Romans 7 & 8. As a preacher I recognise that we are barely scratching the surface of these amazing passages but my hope is that what we reflect on today will encourage you to go back to look more deeply at these passages for yourself.

One of the themes in today's passage in Romans 8:12-25 is a reflection on who we are once we become Christian – and to see that our lives are changed from that moment.

I found it helpful to see it as three questions:

Who are we?

What do we do?

Where are we going?

Who are we? –

In v 14 Paul tells us who we are: “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” Even as I read this I am aware that to call all Christians (a good proportion of whom are women) sons of God will sound at best clumsy and at worst misogynistic. But bear with me a moment and you will see why I didn't retranslate this as children of God. The society of Paul's day was indeed extremely misogynistic and women were considered very inferior to men. This was clearly illustrated in the oft repeated Jewish morning prayer: “I thank you God that you didn't make me gentile, a slave or woman!” One area where the injustice of this distinction was very apparent was in position in the family and inheritance of title and possessions. Put very simply – inheritance all went to sons and nothing to daughters. The daughters received nothing. So when Paul refers to all Christians as sons he was not subjugating women, or asking them to deny their gender, but revolutionising Christian culture by saying that all believers regardless of gender share the status, privilege and inheritance in God's families that used to be reserved for male members of the family.

As children of God we can approach him as “abba” Daddy. When Prince Charles had his 70th birthday our family all watched it avidly because Andrew had been asked to be in the choir for the occasion. In his speech Prince Charles referred to the Queen as “Mummy” It sounded odd to hear the queen being referred to in this way – but it didn't diminish her status but highlighted his status as child of the queen and heir. You and I can approach the almighty creating God and call him “Daddy” – not to diminish him but because he has elevated us to be part of his family.

Paul reminds us that we are adopted in God's family – In Roman culture, when someone who was adopted into a family - it was as if they had died to their previous life. They kept no association or obligation to their past life. When we are adopted by God we leave behind the household of sin and all hold that had on us and enter into God's family of forgiveness.

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Adoption would happen in front of seven witnesses so if that adoption was ever called into question there would be witnesses to testify to it having happened. Paul tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Our experiences of his Spirit at work in us is our assurance of salvation in times of doubt.

What do we do?

1. As heirs - we don't just inherit title we also inherit responsibility to continue the work of God's son bringing God's Kingdom – God's rule to the world. In our state of forgiveness, in our changed life, in our proclamation of the Kingdom, in our prayers and in our words we take on the family responsibility of establishing the rule of King Jesus.
2. As those who have left the household of sin who now live in the strength of the Spirit – we have power to leave behind the activities and habits that we are not strong enough to without God
3. As those who are brothers and sisters of Christ we share in his ministry and therefore share in his sufferings. It was when Jesus suffered that God was glorified in him and it is through being carried through the sufferings that the world imposes on us in the strength of the Spirit that God's glory is revealed in us.

Where are we going?

Something interesting happens around verses 17 & 18. Paul had been revelling in the wonders of us being adopted into God's family when his mind is brought back to the fact that for Jesus, our brother in God's family, glory was achieved through suffering in the world. To share in his glory involves sharing in his suffering.

The metaphor of creation groaning in childbirth resonates powerfully today. Our lives are restricted by Covid-19 (and probably will be for some considerable time); the plight of refugee camps and areas like Lebanon are sinking to an even greater low during the pandemic; devastation of the planet by climate change has not gone away – nor have the tensions around the world which could lead to serious conflicts.

Why, if Jesus is King, isn't my life easier than it is? – why are my prayers not answered in the way I want? These are questions that we have all asked. Paul realised that we live in a time of "Now, but not yet!" we see signs of what will come – but we are not fully in it. We are adopted – but all creation waits for us to be fully revealed as God's adopted children fully functioning for him.

No-one finds suffering easy - but Paul, who suffered more than any of us, had his eye on the goal and he always knew that eternal life with God was something he could never let go of – no matter how much suffering he might experience in the present. Christians share with all humanity in the struggle and grief – but not the despair- in the darkest moments we look forward with hope, knowing that God is using our struggle – along with the struggle of all our brothers and sisters - to lead to us to a time when the glory of God and of his family will be revealed. It was knowing there was a future beyond the present struggles which gave Paul hope – and enables us to love hopefully knowing that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (v.18)