

Sermon: Romans 6: 12-23; Matthew 10.40-42 10 am

“To run with the hare and hunt with the hounds,” whilst it may have some merit as a way of avoiding conflict by agreeing with both sides in an argument - possible when dealing with them separately, but difficult when both parties are present – and so making life easier for oneself, is not an approach which would appeal to St Paul, as we can see in our reading this morning.

Paul, to help his readers understand what he is getting at, when imploring them to keep themselves free from sin, suggests that they can either be slaves to sin or they can be slaves to obedience to God.

In passing, it is worth noting, given the current focus on the evils of our colonial past in relation to slavery and the slave trade, that Paul is not advocating slavery, but rather using it to illustrate the point he is making. As he says, he is putting this in human terms to help his readers’ understanding. In brief, what he is getting at is that they can either do things God’s way or they can go their own way.

In this particular part of his letter, he is referring to how they use their bodies, for it opens with the words:

Do not let sin exercise dominium in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

Rome at the time in which Paul was writing had little idea of what was meant by sexual morality, sadly not unlike our present age. But his argument could equally apply to all aspects of morality: how much alcohol you drink, whether you get involved with drugs, participating in theft and fraud and bribery, or blackmail.

Now I know, or at least I think I know, that none of that applies to you that are here this morning. But what about exceeding the speed limit when you know that that increases the risk of killing a child if they run out in front of you, or avoiding the parking charge at East Croydon Station by staying in your car and keeping an eye out for the traffic warden whilst someone else meets the passenger off the train, as I was tempted to do the other day, or using the company’s phone to make personal phone calls, or... well, I’m sure that you can add examples of your own. You can either do things God’s way or you can go against what you know to be God’s way and give way to your own desires and wants.

Now the situation of those to whom Paul was writing was different to the situation of many here this morning, who have probably been Christians from birth or who have grown up with a system of ethics derived from Christianity. Those Paul was writing to had grown up in Rome and up until their conversion to Christianity had been at home in the immorality current then – they were truly slaves to sin. But now they have embraced Christianity, he doesn't want any backsliding, for as he says, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This free gift of God is more frequently referred to as Grace. And Paul refers to Grace in a rather obscure section in the middle of today's reading, where he writes:

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

The law to which Paul is referring is the Law of Moses, based on the Ten Commandments, but codified further in the Book of Leviticus and even further by Rabbis over the centuries before the birth of Jesus. The point that Paul is making is that it is impossible to earn salvation by keeping the law, since we will all break it at some time or other. However, Jesus, through his death on the cross, has won for us the free gift of eternal life, otherwise known as grace.

Before I go on, it is important to look at something which most of us shy away from and an idea which is very unpopular today. What does Paul mean by "the wages of sin is death"? He is very clear that the death that comes from sin is merited or earned, referring to the *wages* of sin. And it is not just that our lives become deadly in this life. Paul is talking in relation to eternity, for he says that the gift, or grace, that comes from God is eternal life, as opposed to eternal separation from God that he refers to as death.

Now I know that many of us may find this worrying in relation to our partners, our children, and other relatives or friends who have not embraced the Christian faith.

Paul, I think, deals with this earlier in Romans, when he says of the Gentiles, who are unaware of the Law of Moses, that if they naturally act in ways that are in line with the Law, they "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts." In other words, God will judge those unfamiliar with Christianity according to their moral nature, as prompted by their conscience.

Jesus says something similar in what is known as the parable of The Sheep and the Goats, where the sheep and the goats – those acceptable to Jesus and those rejected by him – are judged by how they have treated the hungry, the thirsty, the alien, those in need of clothes, the sick and those in prison.

And Jesus makes the same point in today's gospel, where he makes clear that leading lives that are pleasing to God, can be quite simple, even to the extent that "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones" because they are a follower of Jesus – truly, Jesus tells us - "none of these will lose their reward."

And the reason for this?

It's to be found at the beginning of our reading from Matthew, where Jesus says that "Whoever welcomes his disciples, welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes God." Whatever we do for those around us because of our love for Jesus, we are doing for Jesus, and it will not go unnoticed by our heavenly Father.

But back to Romans, where we were considering Paul's statement: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." As I said, the law refers to the Law of Moses, and Paul contrasts this with Grace. Grace is the free gift of forgiveness which God extends to those who, recognising their need for forgiveness, turn, in the words from the baptism service, from sin and turn to Christ.

Paul then goes on to ask the question: What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Why does he ask this?

It's because it would appear that some people argued that if you couldn't *earn* forgiveness for your sins, but that God forgave you your sins through his generous gift of grace, then you might as well go on sinning, since God was going to forgive you anyway.

Paul is totally opposed to this idea, making the point referred to earlier, that the wages of sin is death, but that if you remain obedient to God, having sought his forgiveness, his grace, then you will receive the free gift of eternal life.

Jesus may have won for us freedom from having to accept the consequences of our wrongdoing, but we are not totally free to do whatever we like.

It's a bit like driving. There are rules of the road that we have to obey. No doubt many of us get frustrated at having to drive at 20 miles per hour in many of the streets in our neighbouring boroughs. But imagine if there were no speed limits in our residential areas and town centres. Every time you tried to cross the street you would be taking your life in your hands. The requirement to keep to the speed limit means that we are all free to go about business in safely.

So Paul exhorts us, don't be a slave to sin, but rather be a slave to obedience to God. And remember that slaves in Paul's day had no life of their own. They were totally owned by their master and required to do whatever their master wanted twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

That, of course, means that in our lives, if we are a slave to obedience to God, there is no room for compromising with sin. Sin of any kind is completely off limits – you can't be the slave of two masters, or as Jesus puts it elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel:

“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.

You cannot serve God and mammon,” where “mammon” means “dishonest wealth.”

The reality, of course, is that being human, there will be times when we slip up. However, what is important is that we should seriously seek to lead lives that are in line with the kind of lives that God wants us to lead.

So then, rather than trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, by being tempted to compromise with what our faith tells us is wrong, we should do as Paul encourages us and become slaves of obedience to God, which as he says leads to being sanctified, that is made holy, and the free gift of eternal life spent in the company of Jesus. Amen.