

Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for the Second Sunday after Trinity 2

Romans 6:1-11

From the very earliest days of the Christian church people have misunderstood or misinterpreted what our faith is all about. Sometimes it has been done through ignorance. Sometimes it has been done deliberately by people trying to glorify or enrich themselves by preying on the gullible and people of goodwill. Sometimes it has been done to try to water down the demands of Christian living, or to make it look no different from the ways of the world around us.

One of the oldest perversions of our faith is dealt with by Saint Paul in Romans 6. It has cropped up in many shapes and forms down the years, but clearly existed very soon after the time of Jesus, or Paul would not have had cause to confront it. The heresy goes like this: God loves to forgive a penitent sinner, therefore we can do whatever we like, whenever we like, and God will be pleased to forgive us. As God loves to forgive, the more we need forgiveness, the happier He will be.

It does not take a lot of thought or imagination to see how absurd is this way of thinking. We saw last week that a genuine faith in Christ crucified and risen causes us to respond to God in love and gratitude, and commit ourselves to living lives that are pleasing to Him. One of the great Biblical pictures of the relationship between God and His people is that of marriage. It runs all through the Bible, and finds its fullest expression in the image of Jesus as the bridegroom, and the Church as his bride. A loving husband or wife does not consistently go out of their way to hurt or offend their partner. Instead, they actively seek to do what is right and good for them. So too, knowing and loving God, we do not go on wilfully offending Him. The Bible reminds us of the pain and grief that God experiences as a result of sin. If not renounced, it leads to estrangement and sorrow. The whole of book of Hosea is an eloquent and powerful exposition of this theme.

Saint Paul gives another argument against this heresy in Romans 6, which takes us to the heart of our sacramental life as the Church: we have died to sin, so it is impossible to go on living a life of consistent and deliberate sin. Many people resist committing themselves to Jesus by dismissing faith as irrational and pie-in-the-sky. In doing so they fail to recognise that God is, in fact, totally rational, reasonable and consistent. Evangelism is not an appeal to our emotions (although, sadly, it sometimes descends to that), but a call for us to be renewed by the transforming of our minds. As Saint Paul instructs the Philippians: 'have that mind in you that is in Christ Jesus'.

So Paul argues that in beginning our Christian life we die to the old life and rise to a new one. As Christ died on the cross, was buried and rose to the fuller life of eternity, so too we make a decisive transition. Jesus himself said to Nicodemus, 'you must be born again' (strictly the Greek says 'you must be born from above'). Whatever the word, a completely new start is signified, and this is expressed in the on-going life of the Church through baptism.

The symbolism of baptism is perhaps best seen in those traditions that perform baptism by full immersion. The candidate is 'buried' under water, and then rises up to new life. Our method of sprinkling (symbolic washing) signifies washing off the faults of the old life and starting again clean and fresh. It is a valid expression of what is happening, but maybe not as dramatic as full immersion. Baptism is the symbolic start of our Christian journey. The old life is cast off, just as Jesus' earthly life was laid down on the cross. As we submit to baptism we acknowledge that Jesus' death is a full and sufficient sacrificial offering for our sins. As we emerge through it, we 'rise' to a new life led and empowered by the Spirit, as Jesus rose and is now ascended and glorified. It is a humbling though that we are called to show in our lives the light and glory of our risen and ascended Lord. May he shine in us more brightly every day.