

A Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for the first Sunday after Trinity ~ Romans 5:1-8

As we move into the season of Trinity we are going to spend a few Sundays looking at the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans. It is in this letter that Paul sets out what it means for us to live as men and women in a relationship with the God who makes Himself known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Every other letter written by Saint Paul was sent to a Church or person that Paul already knew. It was his missionary travels and preaching that brought these Churches into being. He writes to encourage them, or to deal with particular issues or controversies. 'Romans' is different, because Paul did not found the Church in Rome, and had never ever been there. He hoped to visit, and wrote to them setting out the foundations of faith, and how it should work out in daily living. It is the nearest thing to a systematic theology that we have in the New Testament.

Our reading begins with the word 'therefore', so to understand what Paul says in this passage we have to look back a few verses as well, because 'therefore' is always a link between cause and effect. Paul has been talking about the centrality of faith: the faith of Abraham, who trusted God's word and was therefore counted as righteous (right with God). He then says that we, too, are counted righteous through faith, spiritual heirs of Abraham. The difference is that our faith is rooted in a much richer and deeper ground than that of Abraham: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, every promise of the old covenant described in the Old Testament, is given a new and richer meaning in the new covenant established in Jesus.

I find it profoundly comforting to know that I am 'right with God' because of my faith in Christ crucified and risen. I am set free from the treadmill of striving to be good enough for God, to accumulate enough merit points to pass the heaven-plus exam. That does not mean that I do not seek to do what is right and good. However, I do so out of a response of love and gratitude for all that God has done for me; I know that through Jesus I can be what I cannot be through my own efforts. That knowledge of being 'right with God' brings a deep sense of peace, that peace of God which passes all understanding. Paul describes this knowledge as entering into a state of grace, being secure in the unmerited favour of God, as we saw last week. It is this faith in the God who has always been true to His word that enables us to look forward with confidence to the greater fulfilments yet to come. We can face difficult and uncertain times with a sense of peace, and in a state of grace, that the world cannot understand.

Paul reminds us, and we certainly know from our own current experience, that there will surely be times of difficulty and uncertainty. Jesus did not die on the cross so that we might enjoy a life of luxury and idleness. No, there is a well-trodden path to Christian maturity which Paul marks out for us. Set-backs and suffering lead to perseverance, which builds character, which blossoms into hope. As we step into the unknown, or the place of fear, we find that God is with us, step by step, day by day. And so we rejoice, not because of hardships, but in spite of them. Our day by day faith becomes faithfulness, mirroring the faithfulness of God Himself. It is through this process of growth and maturing that we can be certain that God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us.

Finally, we can see that God's plan and timing are perfect. He moves His purpose forward, step by step, 'at just the right time'. This is especially true with the gift of Jesus - his birth, life, death and resurrection. God does not wait for us to be good enough, through our own efforts, to enter His kingdom. He would wait for ever because we cannot do it. It is a sign of the magnitude of His love for us that He has acted 'at the right time', while we were still sinners, giving His son to die for us and to rise again, so that we can be considered right with the Father. And the evidence? No less than the indwelling presence of His Spirit, to remind us of all that has been, and to empower us to become the people He intends us to be. We rejoice in the grace, peace and hope that are ours, and by our words and example encourage others to discover them for themselves.