

A Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for the Third Sunday after Trinity ~ Romans 6:12-23

As I write these words many towns and cities in this country and across the free world are in the grip of demonstrations and protests. The atmosphere is tense and uncertain. The trigger for all of this was the horrific killing of one man in America, but it has now built into a wide-ranging protest against a whole range of perceived hurts and injustices concerning slavery, racism and imperialism over several hundred years. The one thing that is sure is that these issues, some of them absolutely genuine, cannot and will not be solved by the mob and the megaphone. That way always and only leads to new, different and greater injustice and hurt.

It may be unfortunate, then, that in today's reading Saint Paul is talking about slavery in a very matter-of-fact way. It would be easy for us to miss the point of what he is saying because we are distracted by the imagery that he uses. However, the issue is very clear. To what end do we direct our life and energy? Are we following the way of the world, be that the pursuit of wealth, power, possessions or pleasure? Or are we putting our energy into being the people of God, reflecting His image and engaged in the work of building His kingdom? The way of the world is, in the final analysis, the way of sin and death. The way of God is the way of life.

I read a quotation recently from an academic economist that seems to sum up the way of the world: 'spending money we don't have, on things we don't need, to create an impression that won't last, on people we don't care about'. At first sight it seemed a slightly cynical view, but I think that it challenges us, as we live through the uncertainties of the current pandemic, about investing our hopes in the transient status symbols of this world. Maybe these current days are a time to re-focus on the things that are of lasting value and benefit.

Romans 6 presents us with this same challenge: what do we regard as important and where, as a consequence, do we devote our energy? It does not provide us with a detailed code of what is acceptable, and what is not, by way of Christian living. We have to look in other parts of the Scriptures to find that detail. What it does give us, though, is an overview that tells us why a distinctive Christian life-style is absolutely vital; a way of life that stands out in contrast to the ways of the world around us, and stand as a commendation of a better way, and a rebuke to all that is wrong around us.

But if, as Christians, we live in a state of grace (as discussed in recent weeks), surely we are no longer under 'law'. This is a complex issue, and the short answer is 'yes and no'. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. The most succinct expression of the law is found in the Ten Commandments. Many people today dismiss these as 'old hat' and no longer relevant. Sadly, many Christians are included in that number. The Commandments are seen as the means by which a stern and kill-joy God keeps us confined in a life which is deprived of freedom and pleasure. How can we be sure that this is not the case?

We go back again to last week. What is it to become a Christian? It is nothing less than, by the Spirit of God, being transformed in mind and outlook. As and when that begins to happen within us we see the Commandments of God not as a prison to keep us confined. They do indeed provide a boundary, but one with a label on it that says 'Mine-field - keep out'. To go beyond the boundaries inevitably brings harm to ourselves and to others. On 'our' side of the fence we have freedom to live lives that are wholesome and good for us, for others and for the glory of God.

We so often see God's word as 'Do not...' If, instead, we turn each command into a positive we find, instead of narrow constraints, a God who is life-giving, life-affirming and unswervingly faithful. At the end of our reading, in a well-known verse, Paul reminds us that the way of the world, the wages of sin, is death. We get what we deserve if we follow that way. If, on the other hand, we commit to the way of God, we receive something totally different. It is not a wage, due recompense for our own efforts, but it is the free gift, the grace of God: life in all its fullness which flows to us through the self-giving of Jesus on our behalf.