

Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for Sunday 5th July 2020
Trinity 4 - Romans 7: vs 15-25a

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper...”. Do you know that little rhyme and, if so, can you say it quickly, or very quickly. Chances are that you will end up in a tongue-tied terminal tangle. Reading Romans chapter 7 is a bit like trying to recite ‘Peter Piper’. The argument is convoluted and hard to follow, and leaves you likely to give up in despair. However, it is important to persevere with it because it takes us into deep waters concerning the nature of human existence. It takes us into the area of Christian moral philosophy which we tend to think is only for the academic, or for those with too much time on their hands. For most of us, dealing with the shallow waters and rapids of everyday life gives us enough to worry about. But let us dive in for a few moments and immerse ourselves in what Paul is saying, and pray that as we re-surface into the light we will see something new and fresh about God’s longing and purpose for us.

The argument that Paul sets out deals with the paradox of the human condition. Made in the image of God, we have a moral conscience that tells us what is right and good. As members of the human race, infected by sin, we cannot live up to what our conscience dictates. As sinners, even our conscience can become corrupted and cease to reflect the nature of God. That is the human predicament: the ability to know what is right, but by no means being able to do it. We know, too, that God has given us patterns and standards for living (the Law), but these only seem to serve to make matters worse. The more seriously we try to live by the letter of the law, the more we realise that we are incapable of doing so. This is what the ancient people of Israel had to learn from bitter experience. When Moses led them from Egypt on their journey to the Promised Land, the journey could have been completed in a few days. Instead, it took forty years, during which time their character had to be forged in the face of external adversity and their own stubbornness and pride. That wilderness journey can now be seen as a picture or parable of Christian life and experience. When we respond to God’s invitation to a new life through Jesus we do not become the ‘complete package’ overnight. It is a gradual process, a lifetime’s journey.

The problems of the ancient Israelites did not stop even when they reached the Promised Land. They continued to face outside pressures, and were constantly prone to internal problems by turning away from the God whom they were called to worship and to commend to the world. The moral predicament that Saint Paul describes was theirs as well as ours. Nor is it confined only to faith-based thinking. Secular philosophers and dramatists have also wrestled with the issue, and it is at the root of the plots of the great Shakespearean tragedies.

All of this sounds remarkably depressing. It would appear that there is no way out. Indeed, for the secular philosopher there is no way out except to resort to a lie. The great deception of the last three hundred years tells us that, as we learn more and more, we are becoming better people and the world is becoming a better place. This is called ‘the enlightenment’ and is manifestly untrue. Saint Paul himself shows us the seriousness of the problem. He cries out, “what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...?” His answer, though, is not a despondent negative but a triumphant affirmative.

The great confidence of Saint Paul is still ours today. Who will rescue us? “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” What we cannot do for ourselves God has already done for us through Jesus. The world around us may be far from perfect, and we are still work-in-progress, but the outcome is already decided and guaranteed. May the Lord bless, preserve and keep us through these days, and enable us to hear afresh the words of Jesus to his first disciples; ‘peace be with you’. May his peace indeed be with us and in us, so that we may be his instruments in bringing it to the world.