

Reflection from the Revd Andrew Haines for Trinity 5 - Romans 8:1-11

Thirty-six years ago I was in my last summer of secular employment before going to college to train for ordained ministry. It was at that time that my then vicar invited me to prepare and deliver my first sermon, thinking that it would be good practice for me. I was still slightly bemused that God was calling me, with little experience and no gift for public speaking, to be a preacher. I approached the task with a certain amount of trepidation, partly because of my nervousness, and partly because I knew that the given reading for the day was packed with deep meaning and significance.

Of course, it was the passage from Romans 8 that is also appointed for today, and I still approach it with trepidation. The experience of the intervening years has taught me just how significant this chapter is - not just within the writings of Saint Paul, but within the total context of the New Testament. Through the years, scholars have written frequently and at length about this one chapter. There is at least one entire book written about it. What makes it so important?

In its short span, the chapter deals with the particular and the universal; the particular in that God has acted in Jesus for me and for you, the universal in that our salvation is part of a larger process of renewing and re-making the whole of creation. It deals in a practical and experiential way with the working of the Trinitarian God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet it is especially a guide to the role of the Spirit in enabling us to live as the people of God. Towards the ends of the chapter, we are drawn up to heights of praise and worship which transcend our immediate circumstances and lift us onto a higher, heavenly plane.

We will spend this week and the next two looking at the whole chapter, and still not do it full justice. This week we will think of three points that emerge from the first few verses. Firstly, 'there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. This is a powerful and joyful affirmation that we are often prone to doubt or forget. We are so easily beset by guilt and uncertainty, and that would be justified if we had to find our way to God in our own strength. But we do not have to do that, because the way is opened for us through Jesus. Paul frequently refers to the believer being 'in Christ', just as he does to Christ being 'in us'. In other words, there is such an intimacy of relationship and fellowship, our lives being bound up in his, that we are progressively transformed to be the people that God intends us to be. From the earliest days, His command to His people has been 'be holy, as I am holy'.

Secondly, we have a choice to make. Jesus himself tells us the same. He talks of two paths, and of not being able to serve two masters. In other words, you cannot have your cake and eat it. All your eggs have to be in one basket or the other. For Paul, the choice is this: which of two mind-sets dictates our pattern of life. Is it the mind-set that follows the way of the world (the way of futility and death), or is our mind set instead on the things of God (the way of life)? To be set on the things of God requires two things: to recognise that the death of Jesus on the cross is the means of our forgiveness and acceptance by God, and that our life is now work-in-progress under the guidance and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the new-birthright of every follower of Jesus.

Thirdly, we can have boldness and confidence as we step out in Christian witness and service, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not just a nebulous feel-good factor; He is a transforming wind and fire. It is in and through the power of God's Spirit that the crucified Jesus is raised to glorious new life. It is with that same powerful life-giving Spirit that God is pleased to bless us and renew us - not to make us powerful in worldly terms, but to be effective in His service.

Yes, all those years ago, and even now, I approach these verses with trepidation, but also with confidence that as God has called me, so too He will equip and enable me for the tasks that He has prepared for me. Through the years He has done exactly that, and I trust Him to continue to do so. The Psalmist invites us to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. As each step of faith is honoured by God, so we can be Spirit-inspired to step out into the future.