

## Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for Trinity 6 - Romans 8: vs 12-25

We move into the middle section of Romans 8 this week. In the earlier verses we saw Paul opening up two choices concerning our eternal destiny. We can choose the way of life that leads to death, or we can choose the way of death that leads to life. When we set out as followers of Jesus we opt for the second path, even though the description tells us that it may be a bumpy journey. But as we progress, we know that we have the Spirit with us as our strength and guide. We know, too, that Jesus has already travelled that same route, and he will sustain us as we follow: 'I am with you, even to the end of the age'.

We are surrounded by temptations and distractions that can divert us from our walk with God. To stay on the right path we have to put those things aside day by day - we have to die to them. That is what I mean by saying that we choose the way of death: dying to sin daily. Jesus himself says 'take up your cross and follow me'. In Romans 7 we saw Paul describe the tension that we all experience between the desire to do good and the tendency to do the opposite. But, as bearers of the Spirit of God, we know that we have the strength to overcome the pull of our worldly nature. As the Spirit is in us, so there should be no place for anything that is unworthy of him. However, it does not happen all at once. The Spirit is gentle and does not take us by violent revolution, but through steady transformation brings us into new life.

So, as Paul describes it, we are under an obligation (or debt) to live according to the Spirit of God. Worldly debt is a serious problem. It can be depressing and destructive, and hard to escape. Our obligation to live according to the Spirit should instead be a source of joy, and also hope. It does not break us, but makes us and brings us into a new family, each member intimately connected to each other and to God, our heavenly Father.

Of course, we are steeped in the idea of God as Father through our repeated use of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father...', but the intimacy of the relationship only came home to me some years ago on our first trip to Israel. We were staying with friends who had two young daughters. They were full of the joys of life, and sometimes also felt its pain. Whatever the circumstances, they know that they could throw themselves into their fathers arms, squealing 'Abba, Abba' ('daddy, daddy'). There, they know that they would be cherished and, if necessary, comforted. Now, many trips later, whenever I hear a child cry 'Abba', I am reminded that God longs for us to approach Him with the same simplicity and openness. We are indeed adopted into the family of God, and adoption in Biblical times was even more serious than it is today. To be adopted then meant being given guaranteed rights of inheritance in the adoptive family.

So we are heir of all that God longs to share with us; what Paul describes as His glory. However, there are times when that glory seems very far away, and maybe these past months have been one of those times. The second part of our passage, from verse 18 onwards, describes a sense of brokenness, incompleteness and frustration, within the whole of creation and within the life of the believing community. We should not be surprised by this. Jesus told us this is how it would be: conflict, earthquakes, famines and pestilence are all features of the current age, but they will not last for ever. God is working His purpose out and will bring all things to perfection. These verses tell us that when God finally brings His people to Himself, He will also renew the whole of creation. His kingdom will not be a vapour, or a place of disembodied spirit, but will be a physical reality where all is made new.

In the meantime, Paul tells us, we and the rest of creation 'groan' at the state of the world and life as it is. However, for the believer, it is not a groan of despondency, but a sign of strenuous effort - the labour of prayer that Paul likens to childbirth. As in childbirth, there is something exciting and new beyond the pain. Indeed, the groaning is the work of the Spirit within us, yearning and looking forward. That yearning is echoed throughout creation as the Spirit moves across the face of the earth as He did at the beginning.

There may have been many frustrations of late, but the presence of the Spirit is the guarantee that these things will pass. He is the Pentecostal gift, and Pentecost is the celebration of the first-fruits of the harvest, the guarantee of all that is yet to come. So we can take heart, sustained by the power of the Spirit, knowing that the arms of the heavenly Father are open to embrace, and confident of the glory yet to be revealed.