

SERMON 9 JULY 2017

I know I have told you before about my grandmother who lived with my mother, and with me while I was still at home, for the last 30 years of her long life. She hadn't had an easy life but she could certainly giggle. Indeed I can see her now, bobbing up and down in her chair, little woman that she was, quietly shaking with laughter. I remember because it was not something I think she had done a lot of because she was instilled with the attitude that it was wrong to enjoy yourself too much. It was not only unseemly to do so, it was not religious. Have any of us have grown up with religious strictures that have made it hard to let down our hair or have a good belly-laugh? We may well have also grown up with the idea that fleshly things are sinful, that the body is shameful and that God would certainly not approve of indulgence in our physicality.

Such ideas are too often a feature of church life. Yes, we think, God made us and all creation, but God wants us to keep a lot of that earthy stuff apart from him. Our ideas about right and wrong, about sin, can become confused, indeed narrowed down by the need for our institutions, and churches especially, to keep our human behaviours within limits that we imagine God sets for us. Unfortunately our culture nowadays has gone to the opposite extreme and self-respect and dignity often seem to have disappeared. What happens is that our understanding of sin too often is kept within the realm of sexuality, which term "covers a multitude of sins" as we might say. We lose sight of the much bigger and deeply affecting understanding of sin as a condition that is powerfully linked to injustice. When we pray "forgive us our sins, we should more properly say "our sin", the sin of our broken communal human nature that affects the very planet we inhabit. That shifts the emphasis from the important, but also less consequential focus on our individual failings. These more personal issues are an inescapable part of being human, but they are not the whole story of our lives.

Today's readings both wonderfully speak into this story of sin and our broken human nature. When I read the passage from Romans I had the image of being on a swing,

moving up and down, back and forth between the high and the low: swinging from good and then, inevitably back down and up to the bad again, and again. Paul's words are much loved, for good reason: we all know about this. "The good I would I do not do." And I love the way Kathy Galloway has fleshed that out in her hymn that we sung as part of the prayer of confession. Here is Paul, that colossus of Christianity's beginnings, talking in personal terms. He has written much about sin, the law, about dying to sin in Christ and about grace. He can exhort the new Christian communities about the way they interact with each other and keep the faith, and yet, here, he so clearly speaks of the human struggle we all know. He talks about knowing that sin lives in him, some dark force that is inescapable.

For a long time, people were oppressed by the concept of original sin, arising from Adam and especially Eve. Eventually that grew into a belief that even the act of conception was sinful. A Catholic tradition extended this in the story of St Anne, Mary's mother, being also immaculately conceived so that there was no possible taint on Mary herself in her humanity. People were impossibly burdened by an inescapable weight of sin. Nowadays, thankfully, our theologies have moved away from this but, at the same time, we all know the very thing that Paul expresses. There is always a pull between what we know to be good and what is wrong, even harmful. And it does start early, though perhaps, that is more connected to basic curiosity. Think of the toddler sitting on the floor by an electric socket with a metal spoon in hand. He/ she says to herself "no, no, no", but reaches out at the same time towards the socket before being very firmly told "no" and removed from the scene. A lot of addictive behaviour stems from this pull, most especially when the human psyche is wounded and depleted. How often does the addict cry out that they want to give up, maybe to succeed for a few days, but then succumb again, unless real help is there?

So, are we trapped? No! Paul, having laid open his humanity states "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The Jesus we see in the reading we heard from Matthew 11 is indeed the person who understands. He was so deeply connected to the fallen and broken of humanity, eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (those sins of the flesh!) that he must have known intimately the pushes and pulls of their lives. He sat with them to help them see the life-giving choices they could make. But people couldn't understand this. Even John the Baptist who had been so certain about him when he came for baptism, couldn't accept that this man whom he expected to come and bring in the final judgement, would act the way he did. What we heard read to day is Jesus' response to John, who was being held in Herod's prison. John had to find out if Jesus really was the one who was to come, or should they be looking for another. The other they might be looking for was presumably someone who behaved with greater decorum, in a more spiritual way.

We know that there is a verse, in Luke, that says "Jesus wept." I am sure there could also have been one that said, "Jesus laughed." The parables indicate his sense of humour, but, sadly, we often miss that in translation across time and cultures. People would have been amused at the image of a man building a house on sand, or a woman turning the house upside down looking for a lost coin. Jesus shared our human life. While his spirit may have had an extraordinary focus on God to whom he knew himself to be so close, he was not above temptation, even if he did resist. He needed to sleep in the bottom of a boat, worn out by caring for people, bringing them healing and telling them the good news of God's kingdom. He got thirsty and hungry. He didn't expect everyone around him to behave impeccably. He just wanted people to discover they were loved whoever they were, not judged by some standards that held no grace or mercy. He taught a wisdom that was based on what its resulting goodness would be, not on some inherited legalism. And so, he opens his arms and says "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." People, then, knew that the yoke was a wooden bar, not there to hold someone down, though it has been used like that. The yoke connected a

weaker one to the stronger leader so they were a team. The stronger one could help the weaker one along and guide them along the way. The stole that ministers wear symbolises this yoke, symbolises that being joined to Jesus, the leader and guide, in a particular way.

We might all have one, a stole, a symbol of a yoke. But here is another image. There is a crowd of people all wearing back-packs of different shapes and sizes all struggling to move along, jostling each other. They have different things in their baggage, because they have picked up different things along the way. Often that baggage feels very heavy. But then, there is a second image in which everyone is lifting the pack of the person in front of them or next to them, helping them by sharing the weight. This way, everyone can move along. There can also be a third image where everyone moves towards a large wooden cross where they find an invitation to put their baggage down, and where they discover they don't really need to carry all that stuff anymore.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Those words cut through the weight of the baggage we have inherited or acquired along the way. The voice of Jesus speaks with the wisdom that counters the noise of the market-place of life and invites us into the community of God's compassion and love, the community in which we all belong, the community whose welcome is ever open.