

Romans 6:12-23

Our passage from Romans 6 this morning, one of the set texts for this Sunday, is one I confess that I would normally shy away from - and that's because it's all about sin. Rightly or wrongly I would not think of that as a topic that would much inspire me. Sin, after all, has been such an unhealthy pre-occupation with some Christians that my inclination might be to avoid a passage like this and to seek out another text to preach on.

To set it in context, Romans 6 begins with Paul writing about the life of the baptised. In previous chapters he has laid out the wonders of what God has done for us in Christ and the gift of salvation that has been wrought through him. And that gift is received in baptism. But why, we might ask, should we then change? Why not just carry on as we were? After all, we're forgiven. God's grace has triumphed. So why not just go on living an indulgent and sinful life: in fact, let's take it further - surely the more sin there is the more grace there is. The chapter opens with the question, 'should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?' And it is in response to that question that Paul writes these verses about sin and about the life of salvation.

So what was it that attracted me to this passage from Romans chapter 6, given that it's focus sin? Well, maybe it was because the word 'slavery' leapt out at me. Sin here in these verses is presented as something to which we are enslaved and that resonates because of course slavery has been dominant theme in our news of late as part of the 'Black Lives Matter' demonstrations. And because slavery was - and still is - such a terrible stain upon our world it reminds us of how capable we are of sin and of the most inhuman and dehumanising behaviour and perhaps that provides a prompt for us this morning to face up to this reality and to run with this passage with its powerful imagery of slavery to sin. And the first thing that must be said is that pretty much whenever you encounter the word or the image of slavery in Paul's writings you know that Paul has in his the Old Testament story of Israel's days in Egypt, when God rescued them from slavery. And that gives us insight into one aspect of sin: it is a power that rules us, just like Pharaoh in Egypt. You see, there are sins, individual things that we do wrong and we'll say more about that in a moment. But as well as our individual sins there is a power at work in the world, a power that shapes and distorts the world and that holds it in its grip. So when we talk about the world being a sinful place we are referring to the way that it is organised and structured such that it holds many people in captivity and takes from them opportunity and life in all its fullness. To take the example of the Black Lives Matter movement, it directs us to what is called institutional racism - the way that society is often structured and organised such that black people are discriminated against. And the world is that way because of individual choices and decisions people have made, but the result is a society that is unjust, sinful. So I may not be personally racist. I may not commit that sin. But I am still caught up in a racist society. And now suddenly people are discovering all the ways in which their lives have benefitted from slavery: slave owners and slave traders who made fortunes out of this dreadful evil and we've benefitted. I was brought up near Glasgow and many streets in Glasgow are named after traders and plantation owners who benefitted the city: it's not my sin but I have benefitted from it. I am under the power of sin.

But then of course there are too the sins that I do commit, the wrongdoings, the failures, my betrayals, my compromises, my selfishness. And yes, I may blame society to a degree - I may have had a bad upbringing that leaves me vulnerable to certain sins, or I may be subject to intolerable pressures that go some way to explaining and perhaps even excusing my behaviour. But there are still those sins that are freely chosen and I am deluding myself if I try to deny that I sin and fall short of the glory of God - just ask my wife and children. In all these ways I am, in the words of Paul in this passage, 'a slave to sin'. I am in need of redemption, a word that has associations with slavery, with being brought out of captivity.

So, having talked about us being slaves, and drawing on the image of Exodus and release from Egypt, you might think that Paul would talk about freedom. If we are slaves to the power of sin the Gospel, we might think, would be that we are released such that we are slaves no longer to

any power. And this is surely what we long for as human beings, that we should be enslaved by no-one or nobody, for is that not what freedom is all about? The great French political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau began his most famous work with the ringing words: ‘Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains!’ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ended their seminal Communist Manifesto declaring, ‘workers of the world unite!’ ‘You have nothing to lose but your chains!’ To be free is to be released from the chains of slavery to any power and isn’t that what we long for?

Well, here, Paul surprises us. For him, it seems – and he uses stark and shocking language – the nature of human beings is to be enslaved: the only question is, ‘to which power’? Non-enslavement is not an option. Yes, the legendary Bob Dylan said it years ago: ‘it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you’re going to have to serve somebody.’ The difference, however, is that now we are slaves not to the power of sin, but to the power and love of God, and the paradox is that this kind of slavery is true freedom, and the weird and wonderful thing is that the more we submit to it the more free and joyful we become. Some of our hymns reflect this strange dynamic: ‘make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free...’; ‘your bondage is freedom...’ To be enslaved by God is to be liberated from the power of death and to be held captive by the power of life. The great 17th century English poet John Donne expressed the same strange logic:

Take me to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free.

This is the heart of baptism which, as we noted, started off this whole train of thought in Romans 6. In baptism we die to this power of sin: we declare it to be an enemy defeated by Christ. But that does not leave us autonomous and with ourselves in the driving seat. No way. In baptism we escape the clutches of one power, only to be enslaved - to enthralled in John Donne’s words - by another, a new power, a new master. Only now it’s different. To quote the hymn again:

But sworn in your service your word I’ll obey,
and walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Well, it would be very easy to end there, with great declarations of our freedom in Christ ringing in our ears. The problem is that Christians have a habit of talking a lot about freedom but not looking very free, or behaving as very free. The atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, ‘I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed’. And so we need to dig a little deeper into what the redemption, freedom in Christ, looks like. And Paul helps us here as he talks about not just being slaves to God, but slaves to righteousness. As he says in our reading: ‘you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness’. Now, what’s that all about? Righteousness, I must say, is not a word I immediately warm to. It seems to mean squeaky clean and goody-good. Self-righteousness is ugly. But actually righteousness is a beautiful thing. It has to do with relationship. It means being rightly related rightly related to God, rightly related to my neighbour, to nature, to myself. And the power of sin distorts and damages these relationships. But Paul says that the power of God is the power of righteousness – it is the power that mends and heals these core relationships and so restores my humanity, for it is in these relationships that my humanity consists. And for us as Christians to be under the power of righteousness means that we are called to join with God in putting things right, in repairing the broken relationships. Being under the power of righteousness does not just mean renouncing sin: it’s about restoring and repairing the damage sin causes. This is really what the Roman Catholic practice of penance is all about. Penance has come to be associated with punishment for sin: you’ve done something wrong so now you must pay penance. But, no: penance is about repairing wrong that has been done, putting things right. It’s not enough to get on your knees and confess your sin and to receive forgiveness: that’s just a start. Submission to God means coming under the power of putting things right. So I get why people are pulling down statues of slave traders at present, because these statues are symbols of the power of sin. And maybe some of the street names in Glasgow need to be changed as they too celebrate people in hock to that power. But pulling down is easy: what does penance look like? What does repair look like? What does restoration of relationship look like? Pull down the statue! Change the name! Fine – but what little steps are you taking to heal, to mend, to restore?

To be baptised is to be set free. We are no longer slaves to the power of sin and that is good news to those who feel the weight of the world's violence and injustice, and the weight of their own wrongdoings. But there is more to the life of the Christian than this. The challenge is to demonstrate to the world what it looks like to live as slaves to righteousness, which mends what is broken and puts things right. Amen.