

Dear friends,

20th June 2020 AD

Summer alas seems to have deserted us this week with enough rain to make the puddle that filled the bottom of our garden for much of the winter re-appear for a while at least. Hopefully the weather will improve this week so that we can make the most of the long summer evenings (after all, Sunday marks the longest day).

Our High School along with most other secondary schools around the country has welcomed back the year 10 students for the first time since the lockdown started which is a really positive step forward. Despite the fact that the schools are slowly starting back and non-essential shops are reopening, we still have a long way to go before we are out of this crisis. The death toll continues to rise, albeit at a thankfully much slower rate than it was at the peak of the pandemic but it is clear that we still have a great deal to learn about the virus, how it spreads and how to treat it.

With churches able to open for private prayer, hopefully, the gradual relaxation of the Covid-19 restrictions will mean that it won't be too much longer before we are able to meet together again in church for appropriately socially distanced worship.

Our New Testament reading this week (Romans 6:1b-11) packs a lot of theology into just a few verses. It begins with Paul dealing with the idea that we should all go on sinning so that God's grace, God's undeserved goodness and mercy shown to us in Jesus might increase. The 'logic' (if you can call it logic) was that because our sins have been atoned for by Christ's death on the cross, we should keep on sinning so that God can show even more love and grace towards us because we've given him even more to forgive by continuing to sin against him. Theologians call this antinomianism – going against the moral law. It sounds daft and it clearly is but there were those who seriously believed this in the early church and it is a heresy that keeps recurring in the church down the ages.

Now we need to be clear that as Christians, however hard we try to live a good and sin free life, we will continue to sin. Just to take a very simple illustration, I know that however hard I try to stick to the speed limit, especially the new 20 mph limit they have introduced around where we live, it's almost impossible to avoid exceeding it, even by a very little bit. Well it's the same with sin, however hard we try not to, we somehow can't avoid doing wrong day by day and God knows that and we have the assurance that our sin, our wrongdoing, is forgiven by God. The argument that Paul was seeking to counter here was that we should DELIBERATELY or willfully keep sinning in order to give more to forgive and therefore to demonstrate even more love towards us. Hopefully it is obvious how wrong this approach is, it shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the price that was paid for our freedom and forgiveness – which was, of course, nothing less than the death of God's own Son Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to speak of how all who are baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into his death and how as we were buried with Him through baptism into his death, that was so that we should also be raised again with Christ.

We lose something of the power of this analogy given our Anglican tradition of baptism by sprinkling a few drops of water on a baby's head. In Jesus' time as in some traditions today, baptism was by full immersion. In the gospels we read of the crowds flocking into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist and to be baptized in the River Jordan and it is clear from elsewhere in both the gospels and the later New Testament writings that baptism was by full immersion. We occasionally have adult baptisms at St John's by full immersion, especially when associated with confirmation (we use a large swimming pool which takes hours to fill and then warm up and we've even had one of our Bishops in the water assisting with the baptism!). Baptism by full immersion certainly serves to

demonstrate much more graphically what Paul is writing about here, how we die to our old life of sin, symbolized by the candidate being submerged under the water and then rising to new life again as they are lifted up out of the water.

There is a wonderful hope expressed here, a hope that underpins the Christian faith, that as we are united with Christ in his death so we are united with him in his resurrection. As Paul puts it, “our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him”.

What does it mean to be dead to sin? As we’ve already seen, even as Christians we are still tempted to sin and we fall prey to temptation time and again. We aren’t dead to sin in the same way that when a person dies their senses die (a dead person cannot see or hear or smell or touch or taste). In the Scriptures, sin and death are inextricably linked. Next week we will come to Paul’s reminder that the wages of sin is death. Until comparatively recently even here in this country, the penalty for a large number of crimes was death (leading for example to expressions like you might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb). That was even more true in the Ancient world. We have ‘died’ to sin through Jesus because he has borne the penalty for us. Our old sinful selves have died with Christ, the judicial penalty for our sins has been paid as Jesus died but now we have been raised to new life in Jesus. We are literally a new creation, a creation that is alive to God rather than alive to sin. Because we live in a fallen world, sin is still all around us but as Christians we should be wanting to live lives that please God in response to all that he has done for us in giving Jesus to set us free rather than wanting to live lives ruled by sin.

This is deep and complicated theology but the message is a tremendous encouragement to us for it assures us that just as we are united to Christ in his death, so we are united with him in his resurrection. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians (Chapter 1 *“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly realms”*) We have the same power working us that God used to raise Jesus from the dead – quite a thought!

As we reflect on these truths, can I continue to encourage you to pray for one another, that we would resist sin’s temptations and would know God’s power at work in our lives. Please pray for all our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering at this time, whether through persecution, poverty, the loss of a loved one or due to the impact of the Corona virus. Please continue to pray for Veronica and the family and for our own parishes that many would be drawn to come and pray in the church buildings now that they are open and that we would soon be able to resume worship.

Please pray for all who are suffering as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, those who have been bereaved, those who are ill, those who have been working so hard to treat the sick and keep essential services functioning. Pray for the success of the trials to develop a vaccine and those seeking new ways to treat the symptoms. Give special thanks for the seeming breakthrough this week with the identification of this new steroid treatment which seems to show much promise.

Please pray for those in authority that they would govern and act wisely as they seek to restart the economy and pray especially for those developing countries where Covid-19 is having such a devastating impact, particularly Latin America at this time.

Finally, please pray for racial justice, that we would remember that we are all created in God’s image and all are precious to Him because Jesus died for ALL who believe in Him. Jeremy Hunns