

Dear friends,

With the school term (whatever that means for most school age children in these strange times that we find ourselves living in) now finished or due to finish in the next couple of days, we would normally be preparing for the rush to head off on holiday with predictions of traffic jams of epic proportions on road routes to the main holiday destinations along with reports of chaos at airports with long delays caused by computer failures or industrial action, cancelled flights, fractious children and lost bags.

This year, things will be very different. With the lifting of many of the lockdown restrictions, we are now able to travel a little more widely but things remain uncertain and complicated (for example, we would have to quarantine for 14 days if we went to visit our eldest son in the Netherlands for example which makes even that impossible).

Hopefully we will all be able to find some time to relax over the coming weeks before everything starts back for the new school year in September. I have to say that as a family we have thoroughly enjoyed exploring the locality on many long walks with the dog (although on one such walk last weekend, he got so over-excited chasing up and down the canal bank after some ducks and coots that were enjoying winding him up that he lost his balance and, much to his surprise, fell in!).

At the heart of our reading from Romans this week (Romans 8:12-25) Paul speaks of our adoption into God's family. In a world where breakdown of family relationships is much more common than it ever used to be, our understanding of what it means to be a family is very different now compared to even just a few decades ago and certainly to how it was understood back in the first century AD. Similarly, adoption is an increasingly difficult and challenging subject today.

In one sense we 'adopted' our dog when we had him as a puppy – he became a part of our family, but he has none of the 'rights' that our children enjoy as a part of our family. For a while before our youngest was born we were foster carers which was challenging and rewarding in pretty much equal measure as we looked after some children for who family life was definitely not happy (one, who had put herself into care because of the family situation arrived home from school one day in a dreadful state because her father had met her at the school gate to tell her he was being sent to prison).

The latest research suggests that many looked after children and especially older children, don't want to be adopted but prefer long term fostering so that they retain some links with their birth family however chaotic or disorganised that might be. In Roman times, there was no concept of fostering but adoption was much more commonplace. Sometimes a wealthy person without any (male) heirs would adopt someone as their son and when they adopted them, they assumed all of the rights that went with being born into the family including (importantly) the rights of inheritance.

This understanding forms an important backdrop as we consider this passage. Paul begins by speaking of the obligation we have – an obligation to live by the Spirit and not according to the flesh (which is Paul's way of referring to our old sinful ways). Paul reminds us that if we live according to the flesh (continuing wilfully in all our old sinful ways) we will die but if we live by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body (because we have been redeemed) and we will inherit the promise of eternal life in God's presence.

We then come to the heart of our new relationship with God. Paul affirms that those who are led by the Holy Spirit have become nothing less than the children of God.

We receive God's Holy Spirit when we accept Christ into our lives, and it is the Holy Spirit who helps us live for God day by day. The Spirit doesn't make us slaves so that we live in fear but rather brings about our adoption to sonship. The word used in the original Greek here is the legal term referring to being given the full legal standing of an adopted male heir in Roman culture – it is as if we were a naturally born member of the family. As he writes here Paul is reflecting the culture of the time which was male dominated and so he expresses our adoption into God's family in terms of 'sonship' (there wasn't an equivalent for daughters) but the promise is clearly universal and applies to male and female alike.

Because we are now adopted as part of God's family we are able to refer to our Father as any other child would refer to their father as 'dad' (Abba is the Aramaic term for dad, Aramaic being the everyday language that Jesus and the disciples would have spoken). As God's children we are his heirs, co-heirs with Christ of all the riches that God has for his children. Just as Christ suffered on the cross, becoming a follower of Christ doesn't mean that magically all our problems will go away in this life, but we eagerly await the coming of God's kingdom in all its wonderful fullness when Christ either comes or calls. This is our Christian hope, a hope which we wait patiently for but in the meantime, we seek to share that hope with those around us. At times like this it can be a real challenge for us to maintain that hope but we have a hope that is certain because it is nothing less than the promise of God and as we read through the Bible we see how time and again God fulfils his promises and this promise of adoption into God's family is made real by nothing less than the death and resurrection of God's own Son.

The collect for the sixth Sunday after Trinity

Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding: pour into our hearts such love toward you that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

As we slowly begin to resume services please continue to pray for Veronica that she would soon be able to resume her ministry amongst us. Please pray for those services and especially for those who are unable to join them for whatever reason and continue to give thanks for the services that are being streamed via the internet, that they will help many to come to know the freedom, love and hope that comes from being adopted into God's family.

Please pray for those who don't know what it is to have a stable, loving family, for looked after children and those who care for them and for the countless numbers of children orphaned by war, famine or disease.

As we continue our slow journey out of lockdown, we continue to pray for all who have been affected by Covid-19. We pray for the medical staff, for the growing numbers who have lost their jobs or whose livelihoods have been affected in other ways and we continue to pray for scientists seeking to develop effective vaccines and treatments as well as for governments around the world as they seek to safely restart the global economy.

Jeremy Hunns