

Sermon for Trinity 5 – July 12, 2020. Romans 8:1-11

The other day, I heard some sad news, which was that the vicar of the church where I grew up, John Williams, who's been retired for a number of years now, had died. John was a gifted preacher and teacher and the church grew significantly during his ministry. In fact, I think that he deserves some of the credit for me sticking with the Christian faith through those tricking teenage years into adulthood and eventually onto ordination.

He was always a great encouragement to me, and I remember one of the things that he used to say in sermons (although I don't think it's necessarily original to him). As I was thinking of him the other day, what came to me was that he used to say, if you see the word “therefore” in one of Paul's epistles, then you need to ask what is it *there for*?

“Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” says Romans (8:1). So, we need to ask what went beforehand to prompt the “therefore”. That's what we should be thinking.

Paul's letter to the Romans is an amazing piece of writing where he spells out in a very thorough way, his understanding of the Christian faith for the Christians in Rome. By this point, he's taken them through a whole swathe of ideas and he's aware that the people he's writing to have different backgrounds. Some of them will have Jewish heritage and some of them won't. So, he talks about the fact that all of us could have perceived something of God in creation, but we didn't. And he talks about his own people, the Jews could have discerned God and understood God through the revelation they had through the law. However, somehow the law didn't enable them to have the freedom of relationship with God that was intended.

Paul talks about the fact that we all fail: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That's in chapter three (3:23). Then he starts unpacking his idea of what Christian faith means to him. He explains how faith in God can put us right with him again. He discusses how, when we put our faith in God through Jesus Christ, we can be put right with God or *justified* to use Paul's technical word and that frees us to have a relationship with Him.

All who have experienced that know the generosity in the free giving of God – or his *grace* again to use one of Paul's favourite words. A week or two back, we were looking at one of the passages where Paul was exploring this idea in Romans 6. It pointed out that if grace and God's generosity are so fantastic every time we fail, shouldn't we fail some more? That would mean we get some more grace! We saw how silly that argument really is.

Whilst Paul was wanting to set his readers free from ritual obligations, which were becoming onerous and burdensome, he also wanted to emphasize the importance of living lives that were in keeping with the grace that people had received. And he talks about his own internal wrestling in chapter seven as well. We all know the pattern: I know what I ought to do, but I don't do it.

Here in chapter eight, he then says, therefore, there is no condemnation. And we're very good at condemnation, aren't we? We're very good at condemning other people, and we're

very good at condemning ourselves. One of the frightening things about social media these days is that when somebody makes a mistake or an error of judgment, or perhaps advocates of view that doesn't seem to match the expectations of the crowd, people immediately descend. They're calling it cancel culture at the moment. It's a really difficult thing as people and targeted to get them offline. People then dig back through Twitter accounts and Facebook feeds, and all the rest of it, for some something they said in the past, and it's held permanently against you. It's a kind of new form of condemnation. There is no redemption for this, except of course there is for us as Christians. And we understand that there is always the potential for restoration and redemption for those who wish to turn their lives around and put book.

Paul says there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The condemnation that essentially is most important, the most serious condemnation, would be if we felt condemned by God. And Paul says that is no longer something to be feared. So any other condemnation we might receive from anybody else is belittled by the fact that God doesn't condemn and will not condemn.

So this morning, I just want us to celebrate that freedom, that freedom. Paul goes on in the rest of the passage to unpack that, using the comparisons of flesh and spirit. It gets quite complicated in its reasoning, but the opening sentence is probably the most important one for us to take away. There is no condemnation.

So if you're feeling in any sense condemned; if you're carrying guilt for anything, this is good news. It may a legacy of things that you have done. It may be a legacy of things that you haven't done, but other people have stacked on top of you. May you feel free. May you know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

As Paul goes on at the end of chapter eight, to say, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

So may you find that freedom. May you find that condemnation and guilt lifted, and may you find a new life in him. Amen.