

Sermon for Trinity 2 2020 Romans 6:1-11

if you've ever watched the film of Lord of The Rings, you'll know there's a point where the creature called Gollum, who at one time had been known as Smeagol, but had become corrupted by the Ring has a discussion with himself. He's wrestling with whether to trust the hobbits or whether to continue on the path he had been pursuing.

There's a good and evil battle going on in his head and it's depicted quite dramatically. And you sometimes see it in adverts. An angel and a devil on someone's shoulder talking then giving the impression of a conflict in your head. We've all had those experiences where there's something pulling us one way and something pulling us another way.

That kind of conversation is here in Romans chapter 6 following Paul affirming the power of the grace of God at the end of chapter 5. The book of Romans is Paul's explanation of the Christian faith as he sees it. And I think we often underestimate that it's quite an emotional and personal testimony, even though it's written in quite technical language.

Paul has come out of a strict Jewish tradition. He's well-educated by an important and significant rabbi. He was very devout to the point of being almost a religious fanatic. As we know from the book of Acts, he supervised the execution of a Christian, but then he has this extraordinary conversion experience.

And as a result of that, he discovers that the route to a relationship with God is not simply through obeying law and immersing oneself in a religious structure and framework of ritual and legal obedience. There is something else that's greater and more powerful than that. And he would call that the grace of God.

So, Paul is now wrestling with the question of where does that leave rules, laws, regulations, and behaviour. At the end of Romans chapter 5, he says where sin increased, grace increased all the more. "so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21).

That's quite a technical way of saying that all the shortcomings and failure of human beings ultimately is self-destructive and there was no means for human beings to escape, as it were, in their own strength. It is God's grace that has delivered us into new life, and that's been vividly experienced in Paul's own life.

Paul then asks a question. We can almost have this kind of Gollum conversation at this point. Oh, well, does that mean that we sin more because then that produces even more grace? No, no, no, no. But surely you've just been saying that? And so on... We have this kind of conversation going on, or as Paul puts it, shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? (6:1)

In other words what's the point in behaving well if grace will save us in the end? What's the point of righteous behaviour, if that's not the means our relationship with God is restored or established? Paul says that it's incompatible with our baptism to act in ways that are against God's way.

Now, baptism in the new Testament would have been primarily of adults, if not entirely. It would have been by full immersion. A ritual involving water would have been familiar to Jews who became

Christians because, they would have known that when non-Jews became proselytes, as they were often sometimes called, they had to go through an immersion process. There was a sense in which it was understood. And there were other initiations into a pagan religions as well. Having a symbol that left one life behind and entered a new life and illustrating that through ritual would have been familiar.

And that's what baptism does. It's dying to the old and rising to the new. It's leaving one thing behind for a new beginning. When Paul uses that as an image to say, you can't have been buried with Christ and brought back to life by him, just like Jesus himself was, if you then just carry on living in the old ways. It's incompatible

Christians have a word, a fancy word called sanctification, which can sometimes sound very holier than thou, but really what that's about is living lives that are more and more compatible with the identity of Jesus - the model that Jesus gave us. Pursuing behaviour in lifestyle and priorities that are in direct conflict with that, therefore, has to be incompatible even for people who are not 'saved' or brought into a good relationship with God through simply following religious rules and regulations.

As Paul puts it, by grace we've been saved. i.e. we know God, we are friends with God through His initiative, generosity, and forgiveness - and through no merits of our own. That doesn't mean that how we behave subsequently is irrelevant, because we surely want to live lives that are in the shape of grace-filled grace-receiving people.

We're all sinners. We're all hypocrites. We all fall short. We all fail - and we'll continue to do so. That's not really up for dispute. As Paul says earlier in Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And I think he's probably not saying that's just in the past, but it's into the future. And he talks about his own wrestling further on in terms of how there are good things he wants to do, but he can't do them. So it's clear that Paul's very aware that Christians, including himself, continue to make mistakes, continue to fail, continue to act in ways that are incompatible with that model that Jesus gave us.

But we don't disregard it as unimportant. We constantly come back to God and seek his forgiveness and grace, we wouldn't carry on hurting somebody, even if we knew that they would forgive us. If you've got somebody who loves you, you know that they would forgive you. If you made a mistake, if you hurt them and you went back to them you know that you could sort it out because they love you. But you wouldn't carry on doing mean things to them, just because you know that it will be all right in the end. In the same way, you wouldn't carry on saying for six days I'll do what I want, but I'll confess it on Sunday.

That that's really the heart of this battle. Paul says, no, let's live as grace-filled Christians. Let's live lives that show that we've received something from God, because God's grace, God's generosity. God's love has brought us into this new and wonderful relationship. Let's reflect that.

And let's be the people that God intended and made us to be, because there we find fulfilment. He talks about being freed from sin. That doesn't mean we never make any mistakes; it means we are no longer prisoners of guilt and failure.

So may we know God's grace. May we know His love. A may we live lives that express and model that love in his world. Amen.