

## **Sermon for 28<sup>th</sup> June 2026, Year A, Pentecost 4, Proper 8**

**Preached at St Serf's, Shettleston**

**Romans 6:12-end; Matthew 10.40-end**

### **Sermon**

Our New Testament reading today was from Paul's letter to the Romans. We've recently been discussing this letter at Morning Prayer, and those who've been joining in those services will know that he apparently wrote this letter as a kind of job application for his ministry that he hoped to accomplish in Rome, and so he lays out in great and complicated detail exactly what he thinks the Christian faith is all about. While Jesus speaks in parables and stories, Paul is more of an academic theologian, going under the hood so to speak, to explain how everything works.

In this passage, Paul is worrying that those who have joined the Church during his missionary journeys may be thinking that God's grace means they can now live however they want. If they're saved through faith in Jesus, then what does it matter if they keep on living selfishly and self-indulgently? This is almost the opposite problem to those who thought they needed to keep all the strict Jewish laws in order to be a Christian. Paul is trying to guide people towards the narrow path, where freedom from religious laws doesn't mean freedom to sin, but freedom to do good.

Clearly some people in Paul's congregations either expected to become good automatically without any effort or they didn't regard it as necessary at all. And I can understand their confusion – when I first became a Christian at university, I was actually worried that the Holy Spirit would turn me into a completely different, holy, person, and I would somehow lose my identity. I expected to be zapped into goodness, not for it to be a lifelong struggle.

So, this Romans passage makes for awkward reading, as we try to reconcile the unconditional love of God that we believe transforms us and inspires us to love others, with this teaching that we must sacrifice our own will and become like a slave to God.

In fact, this sounds rather awful. No one wants to be a slave, not then, and certainly not now. This 'slave to righteousness' stuff sounds rather more like a millstone around our necks with the threat of punishment if we don't live perfectly for the rest of our days.

It was this tension between the promises of God's unconditional grace and the apparent strict demands of perfection for Christian lives that led people like Martin Luther to kickstart the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Luther had been a holy monk, but he became frustrated with the teaching of the Church that required moral perfection to avoid hell, with constant confessions and penitential acts to make up for any failings. The Reformation subsequently emphasised the importance of God's sovereign grace in making people fit for the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than our own efforts, and theologians since have never stopped arguing about the correct balance between human and divine activity in transforming wickedness into virtue. Some might say it remains the fundamental difference between Catholic and Protestant Churches: Are we saved by being good, or are we made good by being saved?

It's not quite as simple as that, but my recommendation is not to worry about it. Getting anxious about this sort of thing won't make anyone more Christ-like. Jesus himself, and all the saints for that matter, didn't spend all their time devising or following lists of behavioural rules. *They* were virtuous and holy because they had a life-giving and live-changing relationship with God. Spending time in God's presence makes people more like God.

This is really what it means to be a slave to righteousness. It's not about having a list of behavioural rules to follow – those might make you look holy on the

outside, but they won't change your heart on the inside, and you'll either become self-righteous or feel like a worthless failure, or both. Instead, being a slave to righteousness is choosing a relationship with God as the most important thing in our lives. That relationship, when given the attention it deserves, is what grows within us and gradually transforms us.

The Christian Way does involve human effort as well as divine grace, but the role of our human effort is to work hard at relationship-building, both with God and with each other, because it is our relationships that transform us into the people of virtue we are called to be.

This is the message we constantly hear from Jesus. *'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'* In one sentence in our gospel reading, Jesus uses the word 'welcome' four times, to connect human relationships with relationship to Christ, and to God the Father. Never mind all that complicated slave to sin and slave to righteousness stuff that Paul goes on about in his intellectual majesty. Jesus says his Way comes down to welcoming one another, or to put it another way, loving others as you love yourself.

Not that this is easy. Despite the rewards that Jesus offers those who welcome others in his name, love is not always met with love. Jesus is clear that sometimes his followers will be rejected, and, in his day, they were even crucified. But we are called to love even in the midst of hate and rejection.

Even offering a simple welcome can sometimes be challenging for us. How many of us instinctively offer a warmer welcome to those who are already like us, in appearance, culture, education or wealth, compared to those who are not? We can't help it; it's the way we are naturally conditioned. We feel much more comfortable around those whose lives, culture, and interest we understand.

Back when I lived in Exeter, I attended a city centre church and there were often homeless people who slept in the church porch, since it was a large porch without an outer door. And when people came for morning prayer, we'd have to step over them, and sometimes over unsavoury drug and alcohol paraphernalia. This led to a strong tension in the church community over what to do. Do we install iron gates to keep the problem out, or do we provide food and drink and clothes for those sleeping rough. Initially the gate idea started to win out, and designs were drawn up, but then one morning a rough sleeper was found dead in the church porch, and that shocking consequence led to a change of heart, and the opening of a soup kitchen and clothes bank within the church crypt.

Jesus tells us to take our love for our family, our love for our closest community, and expand that circle wider and wider, to welcome even the ones whose lives we cannot begin to understand, whose cultures are alien to us. Because they too belong to God, just as we do.

Welcome is hardest when it takes us way out of our comfort zone. But this is where God's love will always guide and draw us; and this is how love grows, by being stretched just a little further than we want to go.

We can't grow God's Kingdom solely by finding more people just like ourselves, because the Kingdom isn't a matter of numbers, but the quality of our love. And the best way to practice love is by intentionally opening our hearts to those we would instinctively want to ignore or reject. As Jesus says, 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'