

There are some books of the bible, which, however often you study them, however much you feel you are beginning to understand them, when once again you are faced with them, give you something of a challenging feeling inside. In the Old Testament there are some books like Leviticus which seem to have chapter after chapter of, what feels to us today, like lists of somewhat bizarre laws relating to various practices of life. Then there is the book of Joshua which always feels like it should be a book of triumph as God's people are led into the Promised land by Joshua, as he succeeded Moses as the Leader of the Jewish people, but are all those battles really necessary? And then the Books of Kings and Chronicles, with their own different angles telling us about king after king who led either Israel or Judah in the way that is described by the author as 'evil in the eyes of the Lord', and those kings who actually followed God's instructions really felt like the minority, and you can't help but think, 'Why did they do that?'

And when at the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles we read about how first the people of Israel and then the people Judah were forced into Exile by the Babylonians you can't help think, 'Why didn't you listen to all those warnings?'

But then you get to the New Testament, and surely all is much simpler. Well, it's simpler if you ignore the book of Revelation with those most strange, and often quite frightening stories of what needs to happen before the ultimate coming together of Heaven and Earth happens and we all live together in beautiful peace and harmony with Jesus.

And, oh yes, there is the book of Romans. In fact it is Paul's letter to the Romans. That, and the letter to the Hebrews, whoever wrote that one, are possibly the two most challenging books in the New Testament. But hang on a minute, Paul's letters are generally quite easy to understand aren't they? Paul's pattern of life seemed to be that he would go on one of his missionary journeys to a new place; he would bring together the believers in that place, he would preach at the synagogue and bring new people to know Jesus, and he would move on, later receiving feedback on how that church was doing, and then write to them, at least once that we know about, either encouraging them in what they are doing, or correcting them when they were going wrong. But his letter to the church in Rome feels completely different to that, so what is going on?

Well, the answer is actually quite simple. When Paul wrote to the Church of Rome he was writing to a church with whose founding he had nothing whatever to do, and with which he had no personal contact at all. That explains why in Romans there are so few of the details of practical problems which fill the other letters. That is why, at first sight, this letter seems so much more impersonal. Romans, of all Paul's letters, comes nearest to being a theological treatise. In almost all of his other letters he is dealing with some immediate problem, some pressing situation, some current error, some threatening danger, which was causing trouble for the church to which he was writing.

When he actually wrote the letter to the Romans, the date was sometime in the year AD 58, he was in Corinth. He was just about to bring to its completion a scheme that was very dear to his heart. The church in Jerusalem was the parent Church of them all, but it was poor, and Paul had organised a collection throughout the younger churches for it. That collection was two things: it was an opportunity for his younger converts to put Christian charity into action, and then there was a most practical way of impressing on all Christians the unity of the Christian Church, of teaching them that they were members not of isolated and independent congregations, but to one great church, each part of which had a responsibility to all the rest. When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, he was just about to set out with that gift for the Jerusalem church. "At present, however I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the Saints." (Romans 15 verse 25).

Why then, at this particular moment, should he write to a church in Rome that he did not know? Well, Paul had always intended to go to Rome and he knew that the journey to Rome would not be easy. You see the reason he wanted to go to Rome was because he had this desire to spread the gospel beyond Rome. "I desire, as I have for many years to come to you when I go to Spain", (Romans 15 verses 23 to 24). "When I have completed this (that is the journey to Jerusalem, which would also be a dangerous challenging Journey from Corinth), and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain. (Romans 15:28)

So now we see Paul's big plan. Having done Asia, he was going to travel to Rome, from which all the main routes into Western Europe flowed. So he was not going to create a church in Rome – it clearly already existed, but it was a stepping stone to what he had hoped would come next. Sadly, Rome was where Paul's journeys ended. But as a preparation to this hoped for visit to Spain, Paul wanted to set down in a letter to the Church in Rome, what he believed, and that is what we have.

Perhaps the most famous, and most important, verse in the book of Romans is chapter 3: 28: 'So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.' This was what Jesus was all about. That is why he had so many arguments with the Pharisees, because they considered the jobs they did to be the most important aspect of their lives, but Jesus made it clear that it is our faith in God, our relationships with God, which are the most important things in our lives – and Paul, in a much longer section of this letter than I have quoted today, explains why that is so vital to our Christian Faith.

But today's reading, and actually it is the second half of a chapter that deals with the whole subject, all relates to two of those words that clearly are at the centre of our faith – one of which we are often not comfortable talking about and one that we don't always fully understand – those two words being Sin and Grace. Sin and Grace.

In the previous chapter of Romans Paul had talked about the beginnings of sin when in chapter 5 verse 12 he said, "therefore just as sin came into the world through one man and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned, sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law." But then referring to grace and how that means that we are forgiven for our sin just because we believe in Jesus, not because of our works, Paul goes on to say in verse 15, "But the free gift is not like the sin. For if the many died through one man's sin, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ."

When we go into the world, we are confronted with an awesome situation. As Paul thinks of it, both God and sin are looking for weapons to use. Think about it this way. God cannot work without human beings. If he wants a deed done, he has to get someone to do it. If he wants a person encouraged, he has to get someone else to do the lifting up. It is the same with sin; everyone has to be given the first nudge in that direction. Sin is looking for people who will, by their words or example, seduce others into sinning. It is as if Paul was saying: in this world there is an eternal battle between sin and God; Choose your side. We're faced with the tremendous alternative of making ourselves weapons in the hands of God, or weapons in the hands of sin.

And which of those routes we take is our choice. That is the choice that we have been given. We might well say, such a choice is too much for me. I'm bound to fail.

But Paul's answer is don't be discouraged and don't be despairing; Sin will not have any power over you. Why? Because we are no longer under law but under grace. Why should that make all the difference? Because we are no longer trying to satisfy the demands of law but they're trying to be worthy of the gifts of love. We're no longer regarding God as the stern judge; we are regarding him as the lover of human souls.

There is no inspiration in all the world like love. Whoever went out from the presence of a loved one without the burning desire to be a better person? The Christian life is no longer a burden to be born; it is a privilege to be lived up to. As the theologian James Denney put it, "It is not restraint but inspiration which liberates from sin; not Mount Sinai but Mount Calvary which makes Saints." What Denney is referring to is Mount Sinai, the mountain which Moses came down from with the tablets with the 10 commandments, the law, on, and Mount Calvary where our saviour Jesus died, the act of which means we now have grace. The inspiration of Christians comes not from the fear of what God will do to them, but from the inspiration of what God has done for them.

There is so much in this relatively short extract from Romans, but I just want to finish by commenting on verses 15-18. Let me read it to you in the New Living Translation.

' Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living.'

It's that age old question – if we are forgiven for our sins, why don't we just carry on sinning anyway? And of course Paul answers his own question very quickly. 'Of course not'. He talks about becoming a slave to sin – and the importance of understanding this is to remember what the life of a slave was like in those days.

When we think of those who are employed to work for others, we think of people who give a certain agreed part of their time to their employer and to receive a certain agreed wage with doing so. Within that agreed time, they are at the disposal and under the orders of their employer. But when that time ends, they are free to do as they like. But in Paul's time, the status of slaves was quite different. Literally, they had no time which belongs to themselves; Every single moment belongs to their master. They were their masters absolutely exclusive possession.

That is the picture that is in Paul's mind. He says, 'At one time, you were the slave of sin. Sin had exclusive possession of you. At that time you could not talk of anything else but sinning. But now you have taken God as your master and he has exclusive possession of you. Now you cannot even talk about sinning; you must talk about nothing but holiness.' Now there is another scary word – holiness. But perhaps we'll leave that one for another day.

The book of Romans is a fascinating, challenging book. In that book Paul lays down what he believes – and that faith is a total, complete, 100% of the time, sort of faith. That is what Paul is calling us to follow, and do you know what, we could do a lot worse than to take up the challenge. Let's accept that we are willing, slaves of God – all through the power of grace.

Amen