

Morningside

9/7/2017

Romans 7: I do not do what I want , but I do the very thing I hate.

Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.

It could be health. Pain that never goes away. Ageing brings its own battles. Mental illness is a burden carried by one-sixth of the population. It could be family. Have you heard the saying “You are only as happy as your unhappiest child?” It could be loneliness: we have no idea how many people we meet are cry themselves to sleep because they feel uncared for. It could be guilt: The terrible lines from T S Eliot’s poem “Little Gidding”

the rending pain of re-enactment

Of all that you have done, and been; the shame

Of things ill done and done to others' harm

Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

For a child it might be fear of the dark or fear of abuse or fear of failure. For us all it could be fear of failure or it could be bereavement or it could be disappointment.

Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.

We do know something about one of St. Paul’s inner battles. We know partly because he writes about it very openly and honestly; and we know because it is an inner conflict we are all engaged in, although most of us do not fight the battle as vigorously as we should. It is not always easy to follow the argument when a passage from St Paul is read aloud in church; and this morning’s passage from Roman 7 is very closely argued and demands real concentration. But here are couple of

sentences we read a few minutes ago. This is Paul's inner conflict - and it is yours and mine:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise.....I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.

Inner conflict: Paul's and yours and mine. And Hamlet's and Macbeth's and – for all I know – maybe Poldark's too.

The very thing I don't want to do, there I've been and gone and done it. It's the way things are for all of us. And the worst thing of all might be if you don't recognise it in yourself. If you think that this inner conflict does not apply to you; if you think that your days of doing wrong are long past; if you think the world is in a pretty good state; if you can't see that you are not the person you were made to be; then you have a lot of growing up to do. Whatever age you are you have a lot of growing up to do. Most of us, however, can see it all too clearly. We want to help, but we end up doing harm. It would be good to be gentle and kind but we end up being catty and judgmental. We pray "forgive us just as we forgive others, but somehow, every time this person or that person comes on the phone, all our good intentions don't last two minutes. Telling the truth seems a great idea, but, before you have time to think about it, your Pinocchio nose is growing again. St Paul could have been writing your life story and mine: *I decide not to do bad, but I do it anyway.*

And it is not just our individual lives: it is our public life, our corporate life as well. We all want democracy and proclaim its merits, but all the time it seems to end up corrupt and ineffective. Think about climate change and global warming. 97% of experts agree that humans are causing global warming and that global warming is already very bad for agriculture and health and the environment and worst for all of these things in the poorest countries. But somehow we keep on doing what we know we should not do.

Think about slavery. There are more slaves in the world today than at any other time in history. Slavery continues today in every country in the world. Women forced into prostitution. People forced to work in agriculture, domestic work and factories. Children in sweatshops producing goods sold globally. Entire families forced to work for nothing to pay off generational debts. Girls married off to older men. Is that not a blight and a shame upon the whole human race? Somehow the human race keeps on doing what we know we should not do.

Which is exactly what Romans chapter 7 says. St. Paul knew what the human race is like. This inner conflict is one we all share.

Now we have recognised that something is badly wrong somewhere we might be ready to name it. The word he uses for what we have been talking about since this sermon began is sin. Sin is about the mess we are in and sin is about God. When Paul talks about the inner turmoil he is talking about sin and he is talking about God and our persistent, determined, enthusiastic resolution to push God away, away from the centre of our lives and away from the centre of our humanity. It's not just about greed and cruelty and terrorism – although they are all signs of it. Sin, our inner turmoil, is about living without God.

We need to get our priorities right. St Paul believes we all – individuals and the whole human race – get our priorities wrong because we insist in worshipping ourselves rather than God. Because we insist in putting anything – money, shopping, the search for pleasure - where we should be putting loving and serving God who first loved us.

Once, and once only, there was one human being who did precisely what is needed. Who put loving and serving God at the centre of his life: not craving popularity or success or a quiet life but loving and serving God. He said it himself: all that matters is to love God and love

your neighbour. But only once has it been really and truly done, and his name is Jesus.

This same Jesus once said – we read it earlier this morning - *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* Maybe the heaviest of all the burdens he invites us to lay down, to throw away, is the burden of all we have done wrong. All we have done wrong as individuals; and as a society, and as the human race. He promises forgiveness, full and free, to all who truly repent of their sins and are ready themselves to forgive others. Let that be you. Jesus said *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*

Tomorrow I will be on the island of Iona. While I am there I will head for the southern shore of the island, to the beautiful St Columba's Bay. There are hundreds of thousands of coloured pebbles on the shore. And there I will do something that people have done there for a long time. I will pick up one of those pebbles and let it represent some weakness or failing or burden of sin that I need to be rid of. Then I will throw it far into the sea, Then I will pick up another as a sign of a new commitment and bring it home. But before I leave I will do the whole thing again – one stone representing all the members of Morningside Church who would have liked to be with me on Iona. On your behalf, listening to the words of Jesus about the heavy burden you carry I will throw away that which is a symbol of all you need to be free from; and I will bring another home – a new commitment.