

## 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2016 Romans 6 Baptism into Christ

So you get paid £3 million pounds a year and you are still open to making a bit of a dodgy deal on the side? Sam Allardyce has described his behaviour in being entrapped by journalists into exploiting his position as England manager as ‘silly. I did a silly thing he said. Some say he should be punished, humiliated and made an example of and therefore should continue as England manager. Others point out that only England can sack a manager with a 100% record. Rumours are that Big Sam may host the Great British Bake OFF. Anything for a bit of extra dough. Mary Berry is considering the new vacancy.

We all do ‘silly things’.

I have a friend who has an irritating habit of reminding me who I am. When I have a temper or make some bad mannered remark or use some foul language (I know it’s hard to believe!) he will refer to me as ‘Reverend’. Now Reverend Simon’ will be his retort to shame me and make me feel guilty for my behaviour. He is of course reminding me of who I am and what I’m called to be. And sometimes he does it in a way that I’d like to punch him in the mouth!

We may all have said about others, and indeed have had said about us ‘I don’t understand how you could do such a thing. This isn’t like you at all?’

Paul in this chapter six of Romans will remind his readers of who they are called to be and who they serve and therefore what kind of behaviour and attitude is ‘like them’. In the last five chapters he’s worked through the human problem of sin: our pride, rebellion and alienation from God. He has proclaimed the good news that God loves us even though we are sinners. Through Christ we are forgiven and have peace with God.

But such a gospel of grace: unconditional love – can be abused. Hence Paul’s opening line in chapter 6. *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?*

Remember Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15? The younger son gets his inheritance, goes off and spends it on wild living and once bankrupt comes home in disgrace. To his astonishment he finds his father running out to greet him and a huge party is thrown in his honour even though he doesn’t deserve it. A parable told to illustrate the grace and love of the heavenly father. But imagine a year or two later and the young son getting bored with life again and thinking why not run off once more and have a bit of wild fun. After all, play the penitent and I can come back again. Maybe I’ll even get another party?

In our tolerant and inclusive age, many people think the church should only be about forgiveness and certainly not question lifestyle and behaviour. So Paul starts off this chapter by making the point ‘shall we persist in sin, so that there may be all the more grace? Someone keeps

on sinning, living a destructive lifestyle and we should be just forgiving and say 'that's fine, God loves you!'

Paul can sense people's objection to his belief in the free gift of grace - that that it can lead to moral anarchy and a do what you like mentality because God will still forgive. He will outline that whilst God's love reaches us while we are still sinners, it is not so we can stay sinners. The goodness of grace does not free us from responsible obedience - of how to live well and in a Godly way. Grace will shape us into responsible and obedient people. When you know you are loved and accepted by God you will live lives of love and graciousness. As John put it in his letter 'we love because God first loved us' (1John 4.19).

Paul reminds his readers who they really are, and therefore what kind of attitude and behaviour is like them.

'Haven't you been baptized?' he says. It seems likely that the baptism Paul practices and that he assumed among the Romans included lowering the candidate into the water and bringing the Christian up again. In this way baptism took on the shape of Christ's own death, descent into the tomb and resurrection. For Paul baptism is who we are in Christ. We belong to Christ - we identify with him. At the end of chapter 5 he contrasts whether we follow Adam - the representative of humanity that turned away from God, or whether we follow Christ - the representative of the new humanity that seeks a new relationship with God. In other words in becoming a Christian you have moved from one type

of humanity to another and you should never think of yourself in the original mode again. You have a change of status. We are no longer located in sin; grace has met us there, not in order to tell us we are fine and all right as we were, but in order to rescue us and take us somewhere else.

Baptism is a death which leads to life.'

It signifies outwardly our death to the life of sin and our new birth into the life of Christ. Of course it is incomplete without the inward change of faith. When people excuse themselves for not belonging to the church and claim that they are baptised and that is enough I respond that they have the sign but do they have the reality? Are they alive to God?

Many people struggle today because they don't know who they are. Some people have an over inflated opinion of themselves. For many others the opposite is the case. They are full of self loathing, putting themselves down, feeling unloved and of no self worth. Often addictive or obsessive or depressive personalities emerge. Counselling will often challenge that negative thinking but not offer firm foundations to put in place to rebuild your life on. So much of contemporary life is about how we look and how we live, not who we are, or speaking Christianly: 'whose we are'

For the Christian the process is different. To die to sin, to be crucified with Christ is to come to the realisation that you are not perfect, you need to be forgiven, you need peace with God. But it doesn't stop there. To be

raised with Christ is to gain a new life and a new identity.

Throughout Romans Paul will describe this in many ways. He will speak of God's great love for each individual. He will describe us as sons and daughters of God, heirs with Christ. It's an incredible and affirming status. Life may have been cruel to you. You may have been abused, cheated, unloved, damaged and abandoned. God still loves you and through faith and baptism you can be made aware of your status in the presence of God. That realisation, that living up to your real nature is the journey of a lifetime to healing and wholeness.

I know many people whose lives were a mess until they became alive to God. One man I knew was addicted to sex. He had no respect for other people and no respect for himself. He was addicted to this behaviour as a way of getting some love, some intimacy, but it was always snatched and a false gratuitous intimacy. It was destructive behaviour. The grace of God rescued him. He meditated on those scriptures that told him how much God loved him. He found a new foundation to base his life – secure in the new status of knowing he was a child of God.

I read recently of Bob Light who had been addicted to heroin for 27 years. He said *'the needle had become the main focus in my life. Every two hours, I needed to put a needle in my arm for a release. My life was a living hell. I hated myself. I seemed to destroy everybody and everything I touched. I didn't care if I died and there*

*were many times when I was nearly successful; it seemed the only way out.*

*And then, by chance, he met a man who offered him a place to stay, an evangelist, who told him about Jesus. Bob said 'even though I was still injecting I went to church on Sundays and was amazed at the love I was shown by Christians. They made me feel part of their family and accepted me. During this time Jesus started to show me that I wasn't worthless, but chosen and special. The revelation that Christ had chosen me was the start of my self acceptance and healing. I asked God to help me. With Jesus I was given a new start. Within 27 days he set me free from my addiction. My mind, which was confused and totally messed up, has been healed and is being renewed daily. I now have peace in my mind and life. I have now been freed from drugs for five years. Jesus has been restoring everything to me that I lost and more'*

As Christians we have been touched by amazing grace and we are under new management. We are no longer slaves to sin – the way of death and destruction – we are slaves of God, slaves to righteousness, the way that leads to life, eternal life.

You can almost smell the whiff of death in some people's behaviour and attitudes. This way of living will be deathly, to their soul, their relationships. In contrast you can smell the fresh scent of someone who lives graciously, who walks in righteousness, whose life gives life to others.

Paul has two definitions of sin in this letter. He describes it as a conscious decision on our part – a pride

a rebellion – a state of our own will. But he also describes sin as a force, a supra human power, which is more than the sum total of unhelpful instincts and wrong actions. This force can act like a tyrannical landlord, making demands and threats.

Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, in his commentary on this passage uses the illustration of renting a house from a landlord who turns out to be a bully, always demanding extra payments, coming into the house without asking, threatening you with legal action or violence if you don't give into his demand. He gets you to do things that you know are a bit underhand even illegal but you do them out of fear. There doesn't seem to be a way out. In like manner the force of sin is like that landlord: You must live like this; you must indulge your appetites, you must help yourself to others property. And then come the threats: if you don't live like this, you're missing out; you'll never be satisfied, you'll get stale, people will laugh at you. When people say I couldn't possibly give that up it could be that they are simply afraid of the threats of the old landlord.

But then, to your relief, you find somewhere else to live. Someone else pays off your remaining rent and you can leave. You move out and settle in the new place. But, to your horror, a few days later the old landlord shows up at the door and barges into the house. He is angry and demands more money. He threatens to take you to court. The old habit returns: you are strongly tempted to pay him what he demands, just to get him to leave. But you know you are not his tenant any more. You have seen the paperwork; his final bill

was paid; nothing more is owing. Trembling, you get up and tell him to leave. He has no claim over you.

Your new landlord is far more gentle and understanding. What's more your new landlord gets you involved in his work. Except that this work is life giving and life affirming. Sometimes this work is an effort but you are glad to do it, especially for your new landlord.

What is involved in becoming a Christian is a change of landlord – a change of master.

Paul's appeal is exactly like that. Remind yourself of the paperwork. Remember who you really are. Don't give into the voices that tell you are still in Adam after all and should be behaving just like you used to.

Through faith you have peace with God, you are a child of God, you are loved. Your baptism reminds you of whom you belong to. We are dead to sin but alive to God, in union with Christ Jesus. Hallelujah!