

Dealing with the Flesh

Romans 8: 9-17

Sunday 13 July 2008

*(Lectionary Readings for 15th Ordinary
Sunday of the Year – Year A)*

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
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This Sunday I want to focus on our NT passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Over the past few weeks we have had similar readings from the letter of St Paul to the Christians in Rome, and we have touched briefly on them; last Sunday I mentioned our reading from Romans Chapter 7, which I will repeat again shortly. This writing from Paul is theologically dense, so can be quite difficult to follow or to explain in a brief time such as we have now, but I want to emphasise a few points.

EXTRACT: "JESUS TODAY" – ALBERT NOLAN

In order to do that, I want to read an extract from the book "Jesus Today" by Albert Nolan. I think it could be helpful in our understanding of what Paul was writing...

[By the way: He is a respected theologian and Roman Catholic priest in the Dominican Order, which focuses on preaching and the evangelistic work of the church in a very open and ecumenical way. He is based in Pietermaritzburg, and Julia and I sometimes attend a communion service that members of his community hold every weekday, open to anyone who worships with them. Their service includes recitation of Scripture and a moving style of chanting of the psalms. This book, which several in the parish have read, will also be the focus of presentations and discussions led by Andy with the youth on Sunday evenings in the third school term.]

In a chapter dealing with knowing ourselves, and dealing with ourselves in complete honesty with God, and discussing how we handle our ego, he has a short section entitled The Flesh (page 106):

The apostle Paul was painfully aware of what we today call the ego, except that he called it the flesh (Greek word: sarx). This has led to a great deal of misunderstanding, because the word conjures up images of sexual desire, over-indulgence and gluttony. But when Paul lists the works of the flesh he includes hostility, conflict, jealousy, anger, rivalries, divisions, factions, envy, conceit and competitiveness (Gal 5:19-21, 26). These we would describe as the works of the ego. The desires Paul speaks about, such as fornication, impurity, and drunkenness, are also works of the ego, not because they are desires but because they are selfish or self-indulgent desires.

There is nothing wrong with our desires as such – any of our desires. It is the ego's use of desire for selfish purposes that creates a problem. Our desires have been given to us as gifts to enable us to live life to the full. Our

desires for sex, for love, for food and drink, for comfort, for peace, and for unity become twisted and distorted by our egotistical self-centredness. That is what Paul meant by the flesh.

Paul, like most of us, really struggled with this, as we see in Romans 7:14-24. *[In the sermon, verse 14 was read – let the reader read it too.]* He experienced his ego as another law in him that made him do what he did not want to do. So, he concludes: “If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin [ego] that dwells within me” (v. 20). What he calls his flesh, or the law of sin in him, we would call ego. This clearly identifies the problem as selfishness rather than desire. For centuries, well-intentioned ascetics crucified their desires because they thought that desire was the flesh that was leading them astray.

Getting to know ourselves today includes learning to recognize our desires for what they are, getting in touch with our feelings, with our emotions, like love, compassion, sadness, depression, fear, anger, resentment and frustration. We need to become conscious of our changing moods and our possible woundedness from past hurts. As we now know, trying to suppress our feelings, desires, and emotions is not helpful at all. They are not our enemies. What matters is that we do not allow our egos to misuse them for selfish purposes.

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There are many paradoxes and apparent contradictions in life and in our faith; one of them is the claim made in scripture that “it is through our sin that we are saved”. Another is the claim that “God’s grace comes to us in our weakness”.

Sometimes, we persist with extreme images of God that do not closely resemble God as portrayed in the Scriptures or through the person of Jesus.

One of them is an approach to God in a style referred to as “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”, the Christmas baby never quite grown up, a wimpish Jesus-character to whom our sin doesn’t really matter in an age when the concept of sin is regarded by some as outdated. But sin IS a critical issue, was a critical issue to Jesus, so such an image is not helpful.

On the other hand we sometimes have a portrayal of God as “very tough – and because God is uncompromising about sin, just waiting to catch us out and punish us every time we do something wrong”!

Extreme though these may be, responding to God in one or other of these ways is unhelpful. We need more accurate understandings of God’s character, as revealed to us in the Scriptures and through Jesus – and through teachings such as Paul’s.

We’ve been reminded last week and today how St Paul expressed frustration at his human weaknesses, yet he also expressed his thanks for Jesus Christ who alone is able to save him from this otherwise messy situation. **Romans 7: 14 >>> Re-read**

In last Sunday's Gospel we also heard Jesus' invitation to the weary and burdened to come to him. We heard Jesus stating God's standards unequivocally, and at the same time being endlessly loving and compassionate towards us in our sincere but sometimes struggling or faltering attempts to be his disciples.

In this week's reading from St. Paul, he emphasizes that we have at our disposal the power of the Holy Spirit. We are thus true sons and daughters of God, and can call him "Abba – Father", Abba being a very warm and intimate term for a father in Aramaic, Jesus' home-language.

Paul also emphasizes that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, i.e. we are entitled to inherit all the treasures of the Kingdom of God. Despite our current sufferings and struggles with frail human nature, we have the assured hope of sharing with God in the glories of eternal life. Next Sunday's reading continues his theme, stating that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

In Jesus, it was made clear that God was not passive or aloof, nor a disinterested outsider to human affairs; but in Jesus, fully entering the world of humanity, God came to redeem it to the original glory in which it had been created.

God takes on human flesh in all its uncertainty and awkwardness. Grace comes to us through weakness. The biblical account of the nativity, minus any Christmas-box glamour, captures this paradox.

It is by our sin that we are saved, because through it we reach for the grace that saves and sustains us. The NT letter of Titus, as read often at Christmas-time, reminds us "that the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all."

Heavenly Father  
Your Son, Jesus, revealed the wonder of your saving love.  
Renew us by your heavenly grace  
And in our weakness, sustain us by your mighty power,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

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Post Communion:

The good news is this, says Paul, as recorded in Romans 8:1:
"There is now no condemnation for you who are in Christ Jesus."

God has taken action to reconcile spirit and flesh and to reopen for us the means of intimate participation in the life and love of God. That's why we gather at this table. As Paul says, "God raised Jesus from the dead to life. God's Spirit now lives in you and God will raise you from death to life by his Spirit." Thanks be to God.

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