

No condemnation

Readings: Romans 5:12 – 19, Matthew 4:1 - 11

Sheesh, does anyone else struggle with the reading from Romans? At times Paul is straightforward in his writing but his letter to the Romans isn't one of them. When I read it, I wished I had asked anyone else to prepare this sermon – anyone but me! But I felt God saying "Focus on this passage" so here is the outcome.

And the subtitle of the passage helped. The heading in my version (NLT) is 'Adam and Christ contrasted'. We need to be cautious of those headings by the way. They are not part of the original text and so are simply someone's interpretations of the text. That is what all sermons are of course. And human interpretations are very fallible. That's why it's good to bring your Bible to church and why you should check out everything for yourself. Don't rely on me or anyone else to get it right every time.

My next piece of help came from Tom Wright – bishop and commentator. I breathed a sigh of relief as Wright points out that Paul's seems to have written down only some of what he was thinking¹. That makes it hard for us to figure out what was in his mind.

So why should we bother? Why don't we just leave Romans to the academics?

Because we need to understand just how great God's gift of Jesus to us is. As far as we can at least.

God didn't just go – "Ah well, Adam stuffed up. Let's build a replica."
No! Jesus surpasses Adam in so many ways. Jesus has done for us what the first Adam never could do.

That's the guts of the passage really. As Christians it's so easy to ho-hum all that Jesus' death and resurrection means to us; all that his life and teaching means to us. Because we've heard it so many times before.

How many Lenten seasons have you been through?

We need to remember and embrace again that everything Jesus did and said was out of love for humanity. Everything he was and is gives us fullness of life; just as he said "I came that you might have life and that life abundantly." John 10:10b

So let's go a bit deeper into the nuts and bolts. It does help to understand the structure before looking at the content itself.

To state the obvious, Paul begins this section in verse 12. Then he gives us a couple of detours, or explanations or backstories, which really do help us understand what he is getting at. The first backstory is verses 13 - 14. The second is verses 15 – 17. Then he returns to the main thrust in verse 18. He restates verse 18 in verse 19

¹ Romans for Everyone, Part 1, Tom Wright, 90

using the same kind of literary device that the Psalm writers often do. If you say something, then say it again a different way it can clarify and emphasise the point.

So what is Paul saying?

Verse 12

Adam stuffed up majorly bringing death to us all. He put his own ego above God's; asserted himself as an independent and self-determining being.

We all followed suit. Physically we die when we were never meant to.

But what is worse – we choose our own way when we were designed to live in relationship with God. We were intended to flourish as communal people – sharing community with God and with others.

We were never designed to live independent lives. We were never created to make isolated selfish decisions that others have to live with the consequences of. Paul's opening premise is that is we have become autonomous beings.

Now Paul goes into an explanation that was really important especially for Jewish people who held God's word in such high esteem, especially that section of God's word called the Law.

Adam broke one specific command that God gave him. Much, much later the Israelites broke specific commands given to them via Moses. There was a massive amount of water under the bridge between the two. In that interim time everyone kept right on asserting their independence ie sinning. Tom Wright puts it this way:

Human beings went on sinning and dying, even though there was no law to keep track of what they did.²

They didn't break the 'Law' with a capital 'L' but they still broke the 'law'. Even though their sin wasn't recorded anywhere; they still payed the penalty for that sin. That sin was of course, their continuing push for independence away from God.

Physically they died and spiritually their death was evident in their on-going independence. There seems to be some difference between keeping records and paying penalties. There were no records but the penalties of sin still had terrible outcomes.

Adam sinned and yet he is still a symbol, pattern, representation of the second Adam who is to come – of Christ himself.

As an aside, not every Christian believes that Adam and Eve were literal people. Some do believe that their story represented what happened for the whole human race. I don't have time to go into those arguments today.

² Romans for Everyone, Wright, 91

Anyway, the difference between Adam's sin and Christ's 'wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many' are colossal.

And that is Paul's next explanatory focus in verses 15 – 17. Putting humanity in their rightful place again isn't anything like a simple transaction. This pays for that. Jesus didn't die as part of some kind of heavenly contract to assuage God's rage and divert God's love back to us.

God never stopped loving the humans created in God's own image. Never!

The Lord's grace is wholly 'other'! God's mercy and love cannot be compared to the pettiness of sin. Sin and death were cause and effect. God's humongous love brought complete restoration and reconciliation; an overflowing stream of living water to fill the empty void created by sin.

Jesus gets to the heart of the first Testament when he announces:

Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" John 7:38

By the way, while Jesus 'the Scriptures declare'; he is not making a direct quote from anywhere. Jesus' use of the Bible was often of the content and values and message rather than capturing literal word for word.³

I better not do any more asides or I'll be getting as complicated as Paul!

Regardless of our sin, Paul goes on to say in verse 16, that is however heinous our crimes actually are or however terrible we have made them to be in our minds, that is not the point. The point is that the love of God, in Jesus Christ, has reached out to us. God's grace and righteousness enable us to have victory over sin and death.

Victory over sin and death -

Occasionally victory over sin is immediate. My brother in law is an alcoholic but from the moment he became a Christian, he has not wanted another drink. I celebrate God's mighty power in his life.

For most of us though victory over sin is a much slower process. I wish my addictions would be taken away miraculously. That would be awesome. However I know as I battle through the process I don't battle alone.

And even the victory over death is only a partial victory. We still have to die. And that is the only bit we get to see for now.

However we know that both of those victories have to be won and will be worked out in our lives. Even when we die, our death will not be permanent because of what Jesus has done for us. When we die, we are actually born into a new kind of life – maybe we'll sleep for a while but we will live with our Lord and Saviour forever.

³ Though Jesus does quote the First Testament almost word for word in his fight against the devil in Matthew 4.

And just to bring his point home Paul repeats it twice in the final verses of our passage.

I believe the condemnation Paul talks about comes more from other people and often from ourselves than it does from God. We have trouble forgiving others: that's why Jesus teaches us to pray "Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us". Luke 11:4

Some of us have even more trouble forgiving ourselves. That's why one of our Prayer Book absolutions says 'Forgive yourself' after the declaration of God's forgiveness.

There is no reason for condemnation. There is no reason to beat ourselves up. There is no reason to hold onto resentment towards ourselves or anyone else:

..

...Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Verse 18

...because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous. Verse 19

We are made righteous because of Jesus' death on the cross. That death also achieved victory over the spiritual powers for all eternity. No evil has any power over us any more, though it still pretends to and sometimes we fall into that pretence.

In its most basic sense, 'righteous' means 'very good' or 'excellent'. Does that bring to mind any echoes of creation? Remember when humankind was created, at the end of the sixth day God declared us 'very good'. Gen 1: 31

It follows that 'very good' includes the sense of being in complete harmony with God and with all of creation.

That is exactly what the second Adam does. Christ's death is not the act of an angry God extracting retribution for the first Adam's sin. Rather it is the act of a loving God bringing about reconciliation and wholeness once again, enabling us to live in freedom rather than condemnation.

What questions do you have about that and how it applies to your own life?

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable of ducks.

There is a town where only ducks live.

Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down the main street to their church.

They waddle into the church and squat in their pews.

The duck choir sings and then the duck pastor comes and reads from the duck bible.

He encourages them, "Ducks, God has given you wings! With these wings you can fly! No walls can confine you, no fences can hold you. You have wings and you can fly like birds!"

All the ducks shout "Amen." And then they waddle home.

Let's not be like those ducks.

I have lots of questions:

how do we/I live in the freedom from condemnation that Jesus brings?

How do we/I live in the wholeness that comes from God's love and mercy?

How do we/I live in God's plan which has been put into effect through Jesus?

How do we fly like the birds?

I invite you to think and pray on your own questions too.