

Lectionary Readings for 5th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25; St Matthew 11:25-30.

Paul writes in Romans 7 - 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.'

'I do not understand my own actions,' Paul says.

I can't help myself, Paul seem to be saying. I want to live a virtuous, Godly life. I know what I should be doing to make that happen. But I always seem to end up doing the opposite instead.

Paul is burdened by his own failure to make the mark. I am sure that we can all relate to that. Are we not all burdened, to some extent, by our own shortcomings and failings?

That's why some people still relate to the ancient language of the Prayer Book: '... have mercy upon us miserable sinners. Remember not, Lord, our offences...'

We're down on ourselves, because we know that 'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us.'

'Wretched man that I am!' says St Paul, 'Who will rescue me from this body of death?'

Well, thank goodness that Paul also has the answer to that question, and it's a very positive one:

'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?'

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

It is Jesus who can rescue us from our deep sense of failure;

it is Jesus who can undo our sense of being worthless and replace it with a situation of wholeness.

It is Jesus who, in his own words, is 'gentle and humble in heart', who will give us 'rest for our souls'.

It is Jesus who can unburden us, and lift from us the heavy load we carry.

At any given time we might have burdens of health, finance, loss, loneliness and more.

We carry all sorts of heavy burdens, and there are all sorts of reasons for those burdens. But I wonder if *the key cause of our burdens is other people's expectations on us.*

People expect us to stay healthy and strong for the sake of those who depend on us.

People expect us to stay solvent and financially secure for the sake of those whose lives are wrapped up with ours. And we are burdened by those expectations.

People expect us to be useful to society by being in relation with others; and when we lose our job, or lose a partner, with whom we always used to socialise, and our social circle diminishes, we are burdened by our loss of status in the village.

You begin to see where the burdens come from? 'The good we want to do' is determined by what others want, and what they want us to do.

So in Romans 7 Paul is at war with himself in a conflict between pleasing *God* - in whose image Paul can become truly Paul, and pleasing *others*, which causes him to sin, by trying to be the Paul *they* want him to be.

We are always conscious of what others say about us: that is what shapes and forms us into the people we are. And we are burdened when others' expectations of us are impossible to fulfil. As Jesus noted when he asked:

'... to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"'

John the non-drinker, and Jesus the drinker - the crowd condemned them both: they couldn't fulfil the people's expectations because the people's expectations shifted according to their mood and to suit their interests at the time.

Keeping up appearances is impossible in a toxic environment like this.

We are all victims of the expectations of others and burdened by them; and we are all guilty of burdening others at times too.

The good news is that Jesus wants to lift those burdens from us, and in so doing to give us the wisdom to live in such a way that we stop burdening others too.

To allow Christ to relieve us of those burdens and to take his light load instead, we must be willing to make our priority another set of relationships altogether: the completely loving, gracious, self-giving relationships between God the Father, Son and Spirit, which he wants us to share in.

As Jesus says in today's reading, 'No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

Jesus wants to reveal God to us, so that we can enjoy receiving and giving out our share of his gentle, humble, liberating love, the love he shares with the Father.

Jesus sees us differently to the way that others do.

The good news is this: our God does not impose on us - Jesus is gentle and humble in heart; his yoke is easy; his burden is light.

So if we are carrying heavy burdens, those burdens are coming from somewhere else; Jesus invites us to come to him to find rest.

'Come to me... take my yoke.... learn from me...' Jesus says.

We can do that, quite simply, in prayer.

However we choose to pray.

Whenever you feel yourself caught up in those damaging webs of desire and human expectations, come to him.

However you choose to pray - alone with many words, or on the go, offering up the deep thoughts and feelings of your heart - come to him, you weary and burdened, and he will give you rest.

Let us bring such prayers into the centre of our lives.

Let us pray, so that through all of life's situations we meet God in Jesus, just where we are.

Let us unburden ourselves to him there.

Let us learn to desire what he desires for us.

And let us learn from the humble, gentle, teacher how to be less of a burden to others, how to help and encourage them to find rest for their souls in God.

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!