

26th July 2020

Romans 6: 19-23

Today's text is a tough one to understand in the language of the Book of Common Prayer, so I'm going to take the liberty of reading the New Living Translation to help us unpack these few verses. Paul writes:

Because of the weakness of your human nature, I am using the illustration of slavery to help you understand all this. Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

The language of slavery is particularly hard to digest at the moment. We highly value our human rights yet have to come to terms with our history of denying so many their liberty and using the profits of slavery to build our modern nation. The consequences of this are still being felt hundreds of years later. The harsh reality of slavery would have equally been understood by the recipients of Paul's letter in first century Rome. It is estimated that up to 30% of its population at that time were slaves, and some of these would have been members in the church that was established there. Paul is almost apologetic for using the slavery analogy but needs to make his point in the strongest terms.

Once a person was enslaved they not only lost all of their rights, they also lost their personhood and were simply considered property; decisions about every aspect of their life were made for them by the master. In the same way, when we are in slavery to sin our perceived 'freedoms' are just a smokescreen; the reality is that we are drawn into a downward spiral of choices and behaviours that bring us shame – a cycle of lawlessness, as Paul calls it.

However, once a male slave was able to secure his manumission, he enjoyed a wide range of freedoms, including the right to vote, and his children were entitled to full Roman citizenship. We might therefore expect Paul to write that Jesus offers to set us free from slavery to sin and leave it at that. Instead, he goes on to say that we have been freed from one type of slavery in order to become slaves to God! Simply being set free from evil isn't enough – we need a new, righteous master so that we are not tempted to return to the old one.

Paul's teaching is perhaps more easily understood in terms of authority. Whose authority are we under? Whose tune are we dancing to? Paul is very clear that there are two choices here: either we are obeying God, or we are obeying sin. Sin does not a good master make: the wages it pays are guilt, shame, pride and ultimately death. Being 'enslaved' to Christ on the other hand, living under his authority and headship, brings the fruit of holiness and the free gift of eternal life. Notice that our new master doesn't calculate the amount of 'work' we've done and pay us a wage: rather he freely and generously gives the gift of abundant life. Our part is to receive the gift, with thanksgiving, and submit ourselves to our good and generous Lord and Saviour.

'Holy God, we thank you that when we surrender to you we are no longer slaves to sin. By your Spirit and through your Word, show us how to live as children of light in this world. In Jesus' name. Amen.'