

Romans 8: 1-11. Living according to the Spirit.

Who have been the important people on your Christian journey? We all know that we are at different times in our lives and that we have come here this morning for a variety of reasons, though I trust that for most of us the main reason is that we know Jesus loves us and we want to be with others who know Jesus loves them, and together we can worship. One of the greatest gifts of my sabbatical was the gift of time, the great gift to sit and reflect on matters relating to the faith. This is far from introspective self-indulgence. Looking back on our Christian journey can help us understand who we are, understand what God has done for us, and be thankful for the important people along the way. Paul, a passage from whose letter to the Roman Church we heard today, often told people about his Christian journey. We know that from his writings. When he talked he must have often told of his upbringing and education, where as a Pharisee he hated the new sect who followed Jesus of Nazareth. He would have relished telling about his dramatic conversion experience and how he had now given his life to God. No doubt it was necessary with each new set of hearers to establish his credibility. But also, I have no doubt, it strengthened him as well. It is good for all followers of Jesus to remind ourselves what God has done for us and who has helped us along the way.

I suspect that when you look at those significant people, and there may well be a number of them in your journey, there will be one common denominator. There was something about each one of those people that set them apart from others that you knew. Of course they were not perfect, but there was that indefinable something about them. They were different. They lived by a different set of values – well yes, but that is not quite enough to explain the difference. They had an inner strength – well yes, but there is still more. In some way that it is difficult to put your finger on, they appeared to be more alive than you and you really wanted what they had. And finally they had a sense of peace about them. In what can sometimes feel like the

madness of life, they were at peace. This made them important people. But what was it they had? Paul makes it quite clear – they are people living according to the Spirit.

Do please take home the readings today and spend some time this week prayerfully reading through them, particularly the passage from Romans. It is full of wonderful words that need to be lived with. Most of us are used to reading items quickly and maybe just skimming through them. We live in a society where we are constantly and persistently bombarded with information. We must not treat reading the Bible the same as if we were reading a Sunday colour supplement. The words of Paul are a little more important than Jamie Oliver's latest recipe, the latest antics of a so-called celebrity or details of spending a week in a Tuscan villa. But we treat it the same, or, literally God forbid, as if the Bible is less important. We need to read the words of God slowly, taking in all the nuances. We also need to read it prayerfully asking God one simple question – how does this apply to my life? The supplementary question – what should I do about it, will emerge quickly.

Do you live according to the Spirit, or to your sinful nature? That is not a very comfortable question for any of us, for we all know what we are really like. But so, of course, does God. Paul reminds us in verse 3 that God sent his son Jesus to be a sin offering for us. Jesus took the punishment we deserved for our sins. God's desire for us is not that we should be ruled by our sinful natures, but that we should live according to the Spirit. We all know sometimes we will fail. But God does not give up on us. The answer to the question, *do you live according to the Spirit, or to your sinful nature?* should be, *I try to live according to the Spirit and I am sorry and ask for forgiveness when I do not.* I believe that God would honour such an honest answer. That is why each service contains the opportunity for us to acknowledge where we have fallen short and to receive God's forgiveness.

For if we attempt to live according to the Spirit we desire what the Spirit desires. Paul states that our minds will be controlled by the Spirit and will desire life and peace. Jesus said. "I came to bring you life in all its fullness". Of course we are all made unique by God and will have different natural likes and dislikes, but we can all have a great desire to love life and accept it as a great gift from God. How sad when someone wishes their life away or, more tragically, takes it away. Life is a great gift from God. And so many people expend so much energy in their lives worrying about things over which they can have no control. They have no sense of peace in their lives, no sense of the provision of God, that Jesus loves them. Mother Julian of Norwich said the famous words, "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well". This is not nonsensical optimism in the face of a bleak world. Rather it is simply saying that with the inner peace of the heart, outside circumstances are of lesser significance. That is the peace we all long for, and Paul reminds us is a gift of the Spirit.

It is also a great and rather astonishing thought to feel that we can be controlled by the Spirit of God, as we are told in verse 9. How many times have you thought, 'why did I do that?' when you have said or done something that you wish you had not? But when you have done something that is good, that has uplifted and helped others, have you wondered where that comes from? Could that be the Spirit living in you? Is that, as Paul writes in verse 11, giving life to your mortal body'? What a thought!

While I have been away I have been fortunate enough to spend some time with two people who I would consider to be very important in my own spiritual journey. I taught with Tony over twenty years ago, before the faith became real to me. I knew he was a Christian. There was something about his life and the way that he lived it that was appealing. There was something distinctly different about him. Jane helped me to realise just how much God really loved me and that he truly wanted the best for me. Both of them would be flattered and somewhat embarrassed

to know that I talked of them in this way, well it is not very English is it? But it is very Christian, and it is very true. Now the scary thing is, other people might want to talk about you in the same way, they just feel that they should not. Jesus said that we are to be like lamps burning in the darkness. We all know our own failings, but to others we could be those significant people on their journey, the ones in whom they see something different, something attractive. And, of course, that difference is not us. It is the Spirit living in us and through us. Yes that is totally extraordinary. It is also amazing.

(read verse 11)

Spirit of God, live in us and help us to become more responsive to all that you would have us do. Each day help us to acknowledge all that you can do for us, and all that we can do for others through you.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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