Trinity 2 - In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Amen.

*Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39*

This week we are going to continue to look at what St Paul has to say in our lesson from Romans. It will probably help to have the text in front of you. It is Romans 6:1-11

Our passage today starts in an odd place with a question - *What then are we to say?.* This makes us think immediately what are we going to say about what? Abit like a moment when we walk in on a conversation and really want to know what was being said before we walked in the room!

In this letter – what Paul had been talking about before this was the grace of God making many righteous and bringing eternal life. We might be a bit scared of using that term righteousness. However, at its simplest through Jesus, God set us right, brought us in his kingdom with the promise of life everlasting. Through this act God opens his heart of love for us.

I think one of the reasons we are not comfortable with righteous is that it can be confused with Self-righteousness – which generally does not win friends or influence people and is pretty unattractive when we encounter it. Self-righteousness certainly won’t set us right with God.

Both Matthew’s gospel and our passage from Romans centre on righteousness being a gift through our faith in God’s love. Love shown in the saving acts of Jesus, which Paul goes on to talk about in this passage.

Let’s unpack this a bit more with the next thing Paul says… The supplementary question after - *What then are we to say is - Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?* It kind of sounds like if we sin (and God forgive us – with his grace abounding) - We make God look good. Aka us sinning is good for God’s reputation. Paul rapidly says this is not what I mean… and then in rather difficult language explains what he does mean.

We suffer abit here because we aren’t first century Roman Christians, the original recipients of this letter.  Paul answers himself, as he often does, ‘By no means!’. Of course we should not continue to sin, because we have been baptized ‘into’ Christ (v.3). Paul continues to stress the close identification of each and every believer with Jesus Christ. As believers we are on a journey to becoming more like Jesus day by day. He uses aspects of Jesus story to identify with our journey using phrases such as ‘*buried with him*’ through baptism into death in v4. Then ‘*united with him*’ in death and resurrection (v.5), ‘*crucified with him*’ (v.6) and finally ‘*live with him*’ (v.8).

Following on from this deep sense of identification with the life and saving acts of Jesus and the freedom from slavery to sin this brings, Paul asks us to *‘consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’* Difficult as this is – let’s unpack those a bit more . What does this mean?

Let’s start with *I am dead to sin* – what does that mean? It means I recognise the power of the saving love of Jesus in my life. It means I have chosen to love God and live the way God says is best for me. It means I recognise the merciful forgiving nature of God and its power in my life, I know I am living in God’s kingdom now, living in his love and with his promise of love for eternity to rely on.

However *I am dead to sin* does not mean I am incapable of sinning. At times when I make wrong choices, and don’t do what I should or do what I shouldn’t. When this happens, I seek forgiveness of God, and forgiveness of those I may have hurt along the way. The principle at its simplest is that I know that repentance and seeking forgiveness, and being forgiving is the path to a life that is worth living and worthy of God’s love for me. *Just to say - There are in life some very difficult circumstances when it is not as simple as that too.*

Let’s move from that *to I am alive to God in Christ Jesus.* What a powerful phrase that is. This sentence reminded me of some teaching I heard from Timothy Ratcliffe some 11 years ago. It was about being fully alive in God. Timothy is a Roman Catholic priest and Dominican friar. He has written a number of books, but is particularly impressive teaching in person. For him being fully alive – being alive to God has three aspects

* Being nurtured in the Christian faith in a way that helps us know and cherish ourselves and the gifts God has given us.
* Working out our faith in how we live with one another, cherishing others we have to journey with.
* Drawing others to faith and share the love that God has given us.

In short knowing ourselves as beloved children of God, having others to travel with to help us and being a channel of God’s love to us to others. Pretty good principles to live by, but he didn’t stop there. He said three things were absolutely essential to being alive to God in Christ Jesus and what he thought these were may surprise us!

Firstly – that **our faith is active** – it something we are actively engaged in – impacting our day to day lives. It engages our intellects but not just our intellects, it engages our hearts but not just our hearts, it engages all of us body, mind and spirit. It is not passive – or primarily about letting others do it for us.

Secondly, **Faith is not just an individual thing** – it really needs a community element. I am longing for the day when we can worship together and I can get to know you better face to face. I have really, really missed this element of our walk, especially in these early days of my time here. We need the encouragement and strengthening of our brothers and sisters in Christ. I am hugely grateful and thankful for all the phone support and social distanced practical support that has been going on.

Being a christian is something where fellowship is essential. It will be good when we get to the point where we can pray privately in our beautiful buildings, but even better when the day comes when we can pray together. That is going to present challenges, and for some in the most vulnerable groups this will not be advised for some time – which God will understand. It will not surprise you that as your rector - I think being a Christian and not belonging to a Church doesn’t make sense. I think taking this approach means we are missing out big time. The faith is not designed to be practiced in isolation from our fellowship. The church is also not the building but the people in it. We are the body of Christ here! our love of God, and our love of each other and each person is special, valued and essential.

The third essential is possibly the most surprising - it is **Living light-heartedly and joyfully.** Being free not to take ourselves too seriously. To gain confidence through believing together (as God intended it). Grow in love – having loving eyes for the beauty of people around us (and not judgemental ones). Tune into God’s playful creativity and to move away from the mechanical, cause and effect understanding of a world to a more organic and rooted understanding.

Let ourselves be touched by people’s experiences and have hearts of flesh (and not stone). The opposite of joyfulness Timothy Ratcliffe said is hardness of heart. I recognise in myself the need to step back and take a deep breath and look for the good and the joy. I have been finding the current situation pretty stressful. I am not particularly a fan of moving targets, and layers of changing guidance and if I am honest three versions of an important and essential risk assessment in less than a week pushes my buttons!!!

But there is a way through this and the love of God is steadfast and inspiring. Our gospel passage today – clearly pointed that the going is not always going to be straightforward. Challenges and conflicts will come along the way. The important thing is to stay in this moment now. To stay connected to the influence of the Holy Spirit, and look for the joy. An old habit of mine is to look at the end of each day for something to be thankful for and I am going to finish by asking you to think in the week ahead about how we can live our lives more joyfully even in our pandemic times. Echoing the sentiments of St Paul’s letter to the Romans - *We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*. Amen

*References:*

*Fully Alive lent programme – 2009 – Salisbury Diocese Fr Timothy Ratcliffe*

*New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995*