Sermon for Sunday July 19, 2020 6th Sunday After Trinity

Romans 8:12-25

To do justice to Romans in a few minutes is almost impossible, but if there’s a day to try, then our first Sunday back in church has to be it.

For all the real or alleged weaknesses of our welfare and healthcare systems, I think it is impossible for us to imagine living in a world where virtually none of that provision existed. In Paul’s time, people who were destitute would have been dependent on the goodwill or charitable inclinations of others. That’s why we often see in the Old Testament the needs of widows orphans and others being highlighted as an obligation – reiterated in the letter of James.

That’s why I think adoption was such an important and vivid image for Paul, such that he uses it here. An orphaned child who didn’t have any immediate family to take them in was very vulnerable. They might have little choice but to accept living in circumstances which were little better than slavery – or they might be exploited and abused. For them adoption into a loving family must have been a kind of salvation. Roman Law had such provision and Paul would have been aware of that as a Roman citizen.

He would also have known that even though the Jewish tradition didn’t have a formal legal process of adoption in the same way, that people would take in children and bring them up as their own, seeing it as part of their religious obligations.

So, he uses that image to describe the liberating power of becoming a follower of Jesus – the new life with no condemnation that we thought about last week. Fear is taken away, because there is security in knowing we are adopted by God. Not an uncertain day-by-day negotiation of whether we can stay under his roof, but adoption such that we are treated as authentically his children. The unadopted child in his time would have no sense of what life may have in store, no one to turn to, no certainties and huge insecurity; adoption was liberation – the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Secondly, he talks about the interconnectedness of things. Some years ago, people got very excited, even in the popular press, about something called chaos theory. It’s a theory and calculation that shows that sometimes very modest events in one place can be connected to much bigger ones somewhere else. A butterfly fluttering in one part of the world being fundamentally to a tornado in another was often the example quoted.

Here Paul in verses 18-25 proposes that the damages spiritual state that we are in has consequences beyond our human condition. He envisages that the whole of creation is somehow affected – groaning as in labour (v22), and eagerly longing (v19) for it to be resolved. In other words, he sees everything as interconnected, and he talks about creation as a living thing, which itself will one day be set free. The scientific analysis is that ultimate destiny of the universe is that it will burn itself out; Paul’s hope is that somehow God’s purposes will bring it to a different conclusion than that – to use Paul’s word – futility.

And he uses a great word to describe the anticipation. It’s translated into English as *eager expectation* here. It’s a word that is used to describe someone looking eagerly at a horizon for something coming. There is a version of the New Testament in English done by J B Phillips in the 1950s. He translated this verse as creation being “on tiptoe”. In fact there was even a worship song written that used that image [by the Fisherfolk if you remember them] - but we won’t be using it today.

Here in this section of this remarkable chapter, Paul is wanting to emphasise the confidence we can have in the relationship God has established with us through Jesus. That we can be free – not just of guilt and sin, but of uncertainty and insecurity. We have an identity, not earned, but given to us through God adopting us into his family. And in Paul’s eyes that adoption gives us all the status, rights and privileges of being fully a family member – as it did in Roman law, trusting that we, with all God’s children, will come into our inheritance of being in his Kingdom. And there’s a sense in which even creation itself can look forward to that kingdom.

It’s important to remember that Paul isn’t just talking about everything being in the future, nor suggesting that we need not have concerns about this life. Paul has already been at pains to talk about how our behaviour should be consistent with the grace we have received. Likewise, we are people who live in hope, and so our present lives should be shaped by that hope, acting in ways that are consistent with what we are anticipating, what we are expecting, what we are coming into. We don’t just sit on our hands , waiting for something to happen at some unspecified date in the future. We are to build that kingdom now, contributing somehow towards what is to be, and living as if it is already arriving.

So Paul wants to comfort us and reassure us, but also to encourage us into action – into living filled with the Spirit that reflect the values of the Kingdom that he anticipates and believes he has been adopted into.