

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Romans 7:15,19-20

So Paul in his letter to the Romans reflects on an inner turmoil that I would suspect that all of us can identify with at some stage in our lives – that tension between attitudes, actions that I know are right and the weakness in my own inner being to which I end up giving in as I say and think and do what I know in my heart is not right. With it there come the regrets, the feeling of failure with which we are all familiar.

This passage is part of a much larger discussion on the whole issue of grace as opposed to Law. I don't intend to launch into a detailed analysis of Paul's theology at this point – what I do want to do is to set grace in the context of allowing God space, allowing God scope to act in our lives.

Now God gave us minds to think, to reflect but sometimes in our thinking, in our reflecting we can erect barriers in our minds in which we place limitations on how God, the maker of all that is, can act, can be understood. We see a hint of this in the first part of our Gospel reading as Jesus points to those who rejected both John the ascetic who neither ate nor drank and the more convivial Jesus – God does not speak or act through people who behave like that.

So let's go back to this idea of allowing God space. In his early days the Christian writer C.S. Lewis was quite antagonistic to Christian faith. In his book '*Surprised by Joy*' he recalls the time he finally gave in and let God in.

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.

The words “*compelle intrare*,” compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.”

‘His compulsion is our liberation’.

This brings me to that whole idea of ‘finding and being found by God.’ God as present even in his apparent absence. There is something in each one of us, that seeks to look beyond ourselves for meaning, even if we do not want to put the name ‘God’ on it; that is clear in C.S. Lewis’ reflections. The Apostle Paul, as he moved out from Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world, found himself in Athens. Taking as his starting point their own search for meaning, the presence of an altar to ‘an unknown god’ he made the following observation:

²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; *Acts 17:26ff*

‘so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us.’

It is our conviction that God has found us in the person of Jesus Christ – that in Christ God has experienced what it is to be human; in Christ we have encountered God as one who knows what it is to be me, knowing me he accepts me in all my weaknesses and contradictions. Again and again I find myself returning to Paul’s words as he wrote to his beloved Philippians:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. *Phil 3:10-14*

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

It is from this, that I come to the second part of our Gospel reading this morning, with its invitation ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.’

At its heart there is an invitation to exchange burdens. The sense of the Greek in which the Gospel is written is that of exhaustion under a burden from which there seems to be no hope of release. How often do we find ourselves physically, mentally, spiritually exhausted? - as we carry the burdens of our own regrets, disappointments, hurts – and I will give you rest, peace, refreshment in your inner being.

Take up instead my yoke. The yoke is a throw back from earlier times, a cross bar across the shoulders that spread the load being carried, that made it easier to bear. It would have a similar function to the collar that would be put on a horse drawing a carriage, that spreads the load across the shoulders.

I thought of another invitation of Christ, ‘take up your cross and follow me’. The cross, not as a burden to be avoided, but as a way of life, a discipleship, a healing to be embraced – and you will find rest for your souls.

I will sometimes in our family services take our readings from a translation called *The Message*. It is a bit more than a translation, it includes an element of reflection. The following is how it renders these closing verses of our Gospel reading, it is included in the box on your sheets:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. Let go, give God space to work in and through our lives.