

A Reflection on St Paul's Theology of Law and Grace

Brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Romans 8.12-22

The Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans is a triumph of theological reasoning – especially when we consider how early in the life of the Christian community it was written: maybe in the late 50s AD – that is, about quarter of a century after the Resurrection of Jesus. What makes it so impressive as a piece of sacred reasoning – an explanation of Jesus Christ's self-offering on our behalf in terms which make sense both to the Jewish traditions of the Scriptures but also to non-Jewish 'God-fearers' from the Gentile world – is also what makes it so technical and complicated, as if the Apostle is trying to explain himself to a number of different audiences all at the same time.



At the heart of the letter – and at the heart of the Apostle's *theology* (his explanation of *the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ* to both Jew and Gentile alike) – is a series of distinctions which he makes between the different elements of religious experience which pull upon us, sometimes in conflicting directions. Among these, the tension between 'Law' and

‘Grace’ is paramount – the *Torah* which sets out the Commandments of God, in such a way that the focus falls on God’s *judgement* against those who fail to abide by the Law; and the *kindness of God* Jesus Christ, who exemplifies *mercy*. Within our own selves is a similar pull between the ‘flesh’ and the ‘Spirit’ – by which Paul means the pull within us of our weaker mortal selves, over against the call upon us of our better selves, aided by the Spirit of God. It is this tension which is the focus of the part of the letter we read this week – where Paul writes eloquently of our longing to be carried by the Spirit of God, even as we know ourselves to be subject to the weakness of the flesh. In a sense we are caught between tendencies which lead to *death* and those which affirm and enhance *life*. It is why the death and resurrection of *Jesus* are the very centre of Paul’s faith: a death which we know ourselves to share; but a resurrection which carries us into the embrace of God just as Jesus, having come from God the Father to share in the weakness of human experience, returns to God the Father in his Glory, the ‘firstborn of the dead’ (Colossians 1.18).

All of this sounds – and is – theologically technical and demanding. But, as we noted a few weeks ago in one of the earlier parts of the letter, Paul is capable of expressing his meaning in vividly practical and human terms. The other week, we read the text where the Apostle says this:

When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Romans 7.21-23

It is the same tension when Jesus says, ‘*the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*’ (Matthew 26.41). In today’s text, the human focus is more hopeful, more confident, when Paul describes our ability to relate to God as a child to a loving parent, ‘*when we cry, “Abba, Father”*’ (Romans 8.15).

Never overlook these moments in the Apostle Paul’s writing, where this tender and intimate and profoundly human core of faith – the absolute trust which he has in Jesus Christ as a friend as well as a ‘saviour’: and let this human hope and trust be the means which makes sense of the theological language which goes on to describe and explain it. Because Jesus Christ does not come to us as a theological phenomenon, first of all, but rather as the Love of God to meet us where we are and guide us *home*. Thanks be to God.