

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’

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Romans 7 14-25: July 9 2023 – Round 3; *Alone in the ring? The inner conflict.*

I find this part of Romans 7 shocking. Paul sounds like a heroin addict: *‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...’* Maybe for those of us who know some sort of addiction, these words resonate. But for those who don't, we wonder what sort of battle with sin Paul is wrestling with. Is this a flashback to his pre-Christian life? Or is he saying that this battle goes on? How we answer this question affects what sort of church we will be.

By that, I mean what do we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus when we fall short of the promises made at our baptism? The early church was terribly rigorous about the discipline – necessarily so. For a persecuted Church – then as now – the risk to the Church from anyone who betrayed their promises was a life-and-death matter. Apostasy – someone renouncing their faith – was a blow to the faith of all within the community. And if that apostasy was achieved at the hands of torturers, it could mean death for every member.

It's different in an environment like ours. I spoke with a young friend this week who'd been asked not to return to his church because of a brief relapse in his substance addiction after several years of being clean. What sort of church should we be? One that recognises reality and works with it in prayer

and pastoral commitment – the ongoing battle Paul describes himself facing in this chapter – or a church which is focussed on maintaining its appearance of purity by discarding any people who threaten their perfect record?

Paul talks about sin in Romans 7 as an enemy personified; one who causes a state of deathly paralysis in us. He writes that our *old self* (pre-baptism) was entirely in the power of this enemy, subjects of the realm of sin and death; a realm where God's authority isn't acknowledged. As citizens of that realm, Paul says we were governed by a power that was not of God.

What could free us from that power? Paul asks, what if we learnt the 613 laws of God's realm, and tried to obey them? Would that rescue us? No, he says; learning the Law only exposes our plight to view. It doesn't rescue us from the realm we live in. Paul writes ¹¹ ... *sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.*

The sin Paul used earlier in this chapter ^(Rom. 7.8) to illustrate his argument is coveting – wanting what belongs rightfully to someone else. It's an appropriate one for western Christians to consider as far as sins go. Our society sometimes seems to be built on a foundation of covetousness. We've made coveting into a virtue. And we fall prey to it. It's difficult to imagine the harm in just wanting something. The only danger really seems to be addiction. What harm is there in moderation?

But once this natural inclination has been named as something that separates us from God – something that leads to death – then we feel the tension. I long for something, and I imagine that once I have it, I'll be satisfied. But have I the right to spend money on this when someone else does without basic necessities? I'm complicit in a world order which is predicated on cheap labour and ever-growing consumption, regardless of the harm it does to others or to the

environment. Paul tackles this 'guilt of the gap' issue at a personal level in the part of the passage we've just heard, and I'll say something more about that in a minute.

But an important thing we should continue bear in mind while we read this letter is that Paul is writing to a community where he doesn't know many people at all.

The main thing he knows about the Roman Christian community is that there's tension between the two main groups; Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. The Gentiles have far more power than the Jews right then, because the Jewish Christians are returning from being expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius. What is coveted in this community, then, is probably the habit of power and influence rather than personal possessions.

Corporate or collective sin is a trap, isn't it? We might be decent, well-meaning individuals who wouldn't begrudge anyone anything of ours that they needed. But as a society, we're different. We elect governments to act in what we call our national self-interest. Our farmers and businesses know what it is to be victims of a more powerful country's national self-interest. And there are many South Pacific islanders who know what it is to come up against Australian national self-interest.

This NAIDOC week, we're reminded again of the toll of collective self-interest on First Nations people here. And we've seen distressing examples of self-interest in the behaviour of PWC, and the Robodebt tragedy as well. But although we shouldn't just think of sin and judgement in personal terms, we need to do so in one particular sense.

We believe that in baptism, we die to our old self. The allegiance of our old self to the realm of the law of sin and death could only be broken by the death of one partner in the arrangement. The miracle of baptism is that we are granted

that death – death to the law of sin and death, only to rise to new life in Christ's realm.

But although our loyalties have changed 180° through our baptism, there are habits of mind and behaviour which will take our entire lives to turn around. There are things that old monastics called *besetting sins*; the most powerful addictions and prejudices that Christian individuals and communities struggle with. And this is the struggle we encountered just now in today's reading from Romans 7.

That's the challenge; but there's also comfort. As a community, and as individuals, we can face our besetting sins and find comfort and strength to tackle them. Let's hear again the words that Jesus spoke: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

As Paul will tell us next week, there is no condemnation in this Gospel! Thanks be to God for that assurance! Amen