

“BEING GOOD”
Romans 7:7-25

Well, it's good to be back after my recent sabbatical. It was useful and, at times, enjoyable – and I'm very grateful to the church here for the opportunity of a break from the routine pressures of weekly ministry. I'm also very grateful indeed to all those who have got stuck in while I've been away: the Elders, Liz and the folk who staff the office, those who've taken on jobs that are normally done by me, and, of course, those who have stood here week by week to lead worship and preach. We have a hugely gifted congregation here – which I'm not sure we always appreciate – and it's wonderful to know that people are prepared to use those gifts in God's service. So a huge thank you to everyone.

And, while it was good for me to have a sabbatical from you, as I've said to a number of people, it was good for you to have a sabbatical from me. I've been here a long time and that means it's very easy indeed to settle into a rut and not move forward in God's purposes, but it's good to see that you've taken the opportunity provided by my absence to move things along in terms of pastoral care, evangelism and refreshing the vision of the church. I look forward to stepping forward with you into God's future for this congregation in this city at this time.

Quite naturally, a lot of you have asked me what I did during the three months I was “off duty”, as it were. So, to save me having the same conversation forty times over coffee, let me just answer that very briefly. I spent a fair bit of time reading – catching up on some books that feed into ministry as well as reading about the current state of the culture in which we find ourselves. I managed to pull together quite a bit of material that I've used over the past years in services and so on, so that it's all in one place and a bit more easily accessible. Sally and I took the opportunity to experience worship in other churches, mainly here in Lichfield but also a bit further afield, from a large Elim church in Plymouth to a tiny village parish church in North Yorkshire and even a Eucharist in Rosslyn Chapel (no sign of Dan Brown, though). (I'll just add that it's good to be back here!) We were able to see a bit of our new grandchildren and enjoy watching their first weeks of life. I spent a fair bit of time on my bike, enjoying the countryside around here as we prepared for the Coast to Coast cycle ride a couple of weeks ago, so I had some physical and emotional relaxation as well as time for re-charging spiritual batteries.

And I also attended the very first national conference for ministers in United Reformed Churches. It was great being together with two or three hundred ministers, all keen to learn together and eager to move forward in mission. We usually have an annual conference for ministers in the West Midlands Synod, but this was a national event as the URC are launching a new initiative entitled *Walking The Way – Living the Life of Jesus Today*. With the help of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, the denomination is taking on board the idea of being “missional disciples” wherever we are. It's actually the

kind of thing we've been doing here for a few years now, where we are encouraged to see our Monday to Saturday lives as being "on the frontline" of the mission of Jesus, sharing the good news about him through our words, actions and attitudes.

There were some great stories of what is going on in churches up and down the country. We had some excellent input from speakers such as Neil Hudson from LICC, and some helpful insights from members of the church around the world. Of course, as at any conference, much of the value comes from sharing with colleagues and discovering what they are doing that is making a difference in their contexts. One of the keynote speakers, though, was Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury (who kept referring to "the time I was in another job"). He used his sessions to tell us of three women who had been exemplary disciples and who had suffered for their commitment to Jesus. They were not people most of us would have come across – a Russian Orthodox nun, a French Catholic social worker and an American activist.

The last one was the only one I'd actually heard of. Her name was Dorothy Day and she had had a powerful experience of God after years of rejecting him and living a fairly dissolute life, it seems. But that experience led her into trying to help the disadvantaged and disenfranchised in Depression-era America. She co-founded a network and a magazine called *Catholic Worker* and was constantly battling with her Bishop and the Church hierarchy about the involvement of the Church in politics and social action. She was a good friend of and was greatly influenced by a French Franciscan who lived in the USA called Pierre Maurin. Dr Williams mentioned this almost in passing, but it was the thing which most clearly stood out for me not only in his talks, but in the entire conference, I think. What drove Pierre Maurin, what he saw as his mission – and so it helped to drive Dorothy Day's too – was the idea that we are called "*to make the world an easier place in which to do good*". He and Dorothy – and the others who joined their network – realised that the world in which we find ourselves living and working day by day, although part of God's good creation, is not always conducive to our doing or being good, to our living out our calling as disciples of Jesus.

Do you find that, too? I may well be alone in this – in which case, forgive me for a rather confessional outburst – but I suspect many of struggle day by day with the difficulties of living out what we believe God has called us to be, in a world that is not always sympathetic and can sometimes be downright antagonistic. It is tough actually being and doing good in this world, if we take the teaching and example of Jesus as our yardstick.

Yes, this world is wonderful in many ways. God has created an amazing world and we are very fortunate indeed to be living in one of the very best parts of it – a peaceful, beautiful, low-crime, prosperous little

square of God's good earth where most of us are comfortably off and able to make the most of good education, good healthcare and good leisure opportunities. But it's also a world full of temptations, pressures and influences which are not always positive. We know that, don't we? The values and attitudes that we encounter day by day in our workplaces, our schools and colleges, in our neighbourhoods and social interaction, through the magazines we read and the television programmes we watch, through social media and advertising, are often quite at odds with the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God. Individualism, materialism, consumerism, smug self-satisfaction – as well as greed, sexual temptation, self-centredness, ignorance and rejection of God and his ways.

From time to time – if we do ever reflect on it – we are brought up sharp against this tension. And then we start to realise that we are not living as we should be. This world is making it very difficult indeed to be, to do good in the way God wants us to. And that can easily lead to our feeling guilty and even condemned, which just adds to the problems. I was sitting at an event a few months ago with someone I know fairly well, but he started telling me something I didn't know. He and his family worshipped here quite a few years back – well before my time – because they were originally from our kind of tradition. But, he said, after a while they found themselves sitting down over Sunday lunch each week, reflecting on the morning service and saying to each other, "We're just not good enough, are we?" Each week they came home feeling guilty and condemned after what they'd heard at church – so they stopped coming. (They are now very happily involved in the life of another church in the city and far more positive about their Christian lives.)

And that experience is not uncommon. Trying hard to be good in this world is draining – and we so often get it wrong. We so often give in to the temptations which surround us – to get ahead at work, to increase our share of the world's material goods, to appear somehow "better" than we are (whatever that means) in other people's eyes, to chase after ephemeral experiences of pleasure, be they physical, emotional or even spiritual. And then we feel guilty, trapped in a kind of downward spiral from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It happens to the best of us – even the great Apostle Paul.

And we have just read a passage from his *Letter to the Romans* where he expresses his frustration about all that. "I try to do the right thing," he says, "but I end up doing the wrong thing." It's a pain, but he seems to keep on doing it. And I'm sure we can identify with that. We set off, determined to do the right thing – to have a word with the bully at work who's making the intern's life hell, to keep off the site with the extreme violence on it, to be straight with the boss who's asking us to change the accounts slightly to make things look better, to keep a rein on our tongue when the in-laws appear: but we end up laughing along at the intern, just having one last look at the violence, thinking that it's better for our promotion prospects if we do just make a few alterations to the accounts, being rather rude to the in-laws when they

say something we disagree with. We can't seem to help it and it's dragging us down – as well as dragging in the mud the good name of Jesus, whom we claim to follow and whom we say has transformed us.

Paul puts it down to the *“sinful nature”*. It's sin, pure and simple (Can sin be pure?). We seem to be stuck with it because of our human condition. It's like being trapped, unable to escape this constant pressure to do the wrong thing. Indeed, Paul asks, *“Who will rescue me?”* How on earth do we get out of this cycle? We need something, someone, to save us. And in the next sentence Paul points us in the right direction. *“Thanks be to God – [there's a way out] through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*

For some of us that might have seemed part of the problem: it's trying to follow Jesus that's causing the difficulties. If we didn't claim to follow him, we'd just get on with life however we wanted and we wouldn't have to bother with trying to resist temptation, with trying to do good. The thing is, though, we also have a conscience, a kind of mechanism that alerts us if something is wrong in the path we're taking. That's been there in humanity from the very beginning. It's part of the image of God in us, that knowledge of good and evil. And it's there because God wants us to do good, to do things his way, to get the very best out of the life he has given us. And it's there for our safety, because God has already made it clear that if we go on doing the wrong things, the consequences will be eternal for us – and they won't be good consequences either.

Now, we can ignore our conscience – and if we do that often enough it can just render our conscience numb and we don't even bother any more. We can always find someone or something else to blame, so that we don't consider it really to be our fault and we don't have to deal with it. Or we can do as Paul does and grapple with it and then discover that Jesus can bring some relief. You see, his teaching and example point us in the right direction – we need to ask for forgiveness and try to move forward. But his greatest contribution was to die on the cross – what we're remembering here in this communion this morning.

Jesus' death on the cross broke the power of evil over us. It proclaimed that things do not have to be this way: there is an alternative. Belief in him, faith in what he has done and who he is can help us break free of this constant struggle with doing wrong. Through his Holy Spirit, we can have the strength to overcome temptation and look forward not only to a liberated life here and now, but to an eternity with Jesus in his Kingdom. Jesus can give us the help we need to resist temptation, but importantly, if we truly do want to follow him, he can forgive us when we do succumb. The great thing is, though, that every time we try to resist we are getting a little stronger – we are no longer in that downward spiral which Paul describes in that passage we've just read.

So the challenge this morning is not simply to keep trying harder under our own steam, but to reach out and receive the help which Jesus offers. Think carefully about that as we take the bread and wine this morning. Maybe then we'll start finding it a bit easier to do good in this world.