

## *A free life of obedience*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost — 2 July 2017  
Reverend Martin Johnson

*Genesis 22.1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6.12-23; Matthew 10.40-42*

Letters to the Editor. Dear Sir, news of the “seismic shift away from religion” (based on the 2017 census) is alarming. This means that nearly a third of our population believes there is no foundation for ethics and morality. Choice of behaviour in all contexts then becomes arbitrary. The correspondent goes on to give a reason why such a shift has occurred, he concludes: The result? A more selfish, more violent, more confused society.

Paul is not the easiest of the New Testament writers and clearly Romans, his great theological treatise, is the most difficult to grasp. In today's reading we find Paul at his very best—or worst! In fact, I read recently that a sentence in verse 16 of Chapter 6 is one of the most convoluted he ever wrote, that is saying something! What I thought we should do this morning is have a look at this reading from Romans and try and decipher what Paul is saying.

What we should understand first is that Paul is describing a situation very common in his day, that of slavery. In New Testament times the slave was *literally* the property of someone else. The slave has no rights of movement or travel; a slave can only travel with the master's licence. A slave cannot marry without the master's permission and slaves were routinely tortured; it was assumed that no slave would tell the truth unless forced. Slaves could be used for whatever purpose their master wished and killed with impunity. They might have to share in any punishment meted out against their master which could include crucifixion. They could be freed, if a slave could buy his way out of service, but it was rare. He or she may be bought or sold. What I am trying to stress is that the slave was a chattel something to be owned, they owed complete, total obedience to whoever owned them.

So the image Paul is trying to set up is that of a slave transferring from one master to another. Following the transfer the slave's situation is far better but he is still under obedience to a master, there is never a time when obedience is not required. The two masters are 'sin' and 'righteousness' and Paul personifies them. The former master was obeyed whether the slave liked it or not, the new master is obeyed willingly—from the heart. Paul apologises for using this slavery analogy. I'm sorry, he says, but because of your natural limitations, it's all I can do.

He then goes on to describe the outcome of this change of master. The old way of slavery led to impurity and lawlessness, obedience to the new master will lead to sanctification. Righteousness leads to life, sin to death. Ultimately Paul tells these new converts that the old life of selfishness—the basis of all sin, is replaced by a new life in which obedience is given *freely* and this has ramifications for their lives 'in the Body' those baptised 'in Christ.'

For Paul, being baptised into the Body was this transference from one master to another, from that moment on whatever you did was linked with being a member of a body. This is thinking echoed by our reading from the end of chapter 10 of Matthew which we heard this morning. This chapter begins with Jesus naming the twelve and then instructing them about what discipleship entails. It culminates in the words: 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.' This and the passage about giving 'even a cup of cold water' help us to understand what a particularly Christian ethic is all about, it is incarnationally driven. What we do, we do *to* Christ and we do *in* Christ. A Christian ethic then is all about obedience to the one into whom we have been grafted.

I have often wondered about the situation that our correspondent complains about in the Letters to the Editor this week. I know people, indeed I have close friends, who would have written 'no religion' on their census forms. They were not exposed to religious thought as youngsters, they are not anti-religion, they are just not religious. But their ethics are to be admired, imitated even, their social conscience is broad, they think carefully about what they do in light of others and the environment. But there must be more; ethics is always more than what we do, it is primarily who we are and this is where Christian ethics provide that foundation which is in danger of being lost.

In this chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel we were confronted with some difficult words last week: Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Just a sample of the great demands that discipleship makes. Jesus is urging his followers not to be distracted, to know the freedom that comes with self-knowledge—knowing to whom you belong and to what you are called. This it seems is the mark of the saints their lack of distraction from their calling. Today more and more people are distracted by issues of identity, belonging, relationship, authority. This it seems, in part, is the issue we face in contemporary society and culture.

We as Christians make our moral and ethical and decisions in much the same way as anybody else. The difference is that we are engaged in a larger reality. The reality that is God. Our way, our calling is to show the character of the God to whom *we belong*, to whom we have been, in Paul's idiom, *enslaved*. Our calling too is to show the character of the community into which we have been grafted. Our ethic is to show what God's selfless attention to us looks like in the everyday, the cup of cold water. This is where perhaps our ethical foundation will be lacking in the future, time will tell. If the story of Abraham and the near sacrifice of Isaac, as difficult as it is, tells us anything, it is that obedience lies at the heart of who we are. It is desperately unfashionable and we will need to find new ways to present it to a cynical, distracted world; but it is our calling to speak into a world that is increasingly unable to find what it is and to whom to give obedience. Amen.