

“Longing and Belonging”

Sermon preached at St Mark’s Church, Newnham, Cambridge

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ROMANS 6:15-19

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!

¹⁶ Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart *the pattern of teaching* that has now claimed your allegiance.

¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

¹⁹ I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.

One of the things that’s always intrigued me about the Roman Catholic Church is the confessional box. When I was training for ordination here at Ridley, we paid a visit to a Catholic Seminary. We got taken on a tour around a vast building deep in leafy Surrey. I don’t remember much about the tour, but I do remember a large room with row of confessional boxes on one side – walk-in wardrobes for the would-be priests. Each of them had a green light and a red light above the door, so you didn’t go barging in on someone else’s salacious revelations. (Actually, I couldn’t help thinking the green light really meant “nothing to declare.”) As I child I was especially intrigued by the confessional. We used to go on holiday to France and visit many Catholic Churches and cathedrals, and I’d spend a long time staring at those dark double-doored cabinets propped up against the wall. And what intrigued me most of all at that age was the system of forgiveness they represented (at least as I understood it). “What a wonderful religion this must be!” I thought. “During the week, you can do whatever you like, commit every imaginable sin to your heart’s content, revel in every excess, because you know at the end of the week you can always nip into the confessional and get it all absolved and wiped away. Catholicism’s really got something going for it. No wonder it’s so popular.”

If the Apostle Paul had met me then and heard me say that, he’d have replied with something like. . . “I think you’ve rather missed the point of Christianity, Jeremy.” (Although he wouldn’t have put it so politely.) Here in our reading from Romans, Paul’s writing to people who’d very likely be thinking the same sort of thing as I did back then about Roman Catholicism. These are

people who've been told they're free from the law, free from living under the Jewish legal system, free from the condemnation and exclusion it could so easily bring. People who were very likely saying to themselves: "well in that case, let's live it up; if there's no Jewish Law, and no finger-wagging God waiting to pounce if we step out of line, if forgiveness is always right there for the taking, if there's an infinite spring of grace and love always available – what does it matter how you live? Who needs morality, let alone rules and regulations? In fact some of them might have been saying – the more we sin, the more that gives God a chance to show how forgiving he is. Let's "sin that grace may abound"" (Paul's words earlier in the chapter). It reminds me of a friend of mine who use to say to people: "You ought to sin a bit more, you know; it'll give God something to do."

And Paul's reply? "I think you've rather missed the point." (Or words to that effect.)

And what *is* the point they're missing? What's wrong with what they're saying?

Let's concentrate on just one section of this reading: vss. 5-19. What's the point they're missing?

Quite simply this:

They belong to Christ. Right at the start of this chapter in Romans, Paul puts it bluntly: you've been baptized into Christ. Baptism means you belong to him. You know those little silver tabs you find on stray dogs – "this dog belongs to...."? That's what baptism does. It's a badge tells the world: this person belongs to Christ. And that's you, says Paul. You belong to Christ.

And here in our passage, he puts it even more bluntly. He says in effect – you're *slaves* of Christ. "You're slaves of the one you obey" – and the one they're obeying, of course, is Jesus himself. In fact, right at the start of Romans, Paul calls himself "a slave of Christ" (1:1).

Now on the face of it, that's shocking language. A slave in those days had no rights, no power; slaves were the lowest of the low, mere tools to be used and abused. Slaves were tortured and beaten. Mere things, not people.

Well, certainly – many were. But that's not the whole story. It all depended on whom you served. Some people actually sold themselves into slavery because they'd get treated better than they would anywhere else. Some of the literate ones were secretaries; some were administrators, estate managers. And that would give security to them and their families, a security they might not be able to find anywhere else: the security of *belonging*. And that's why Paul's uses the word here. It's a *belonging* word above all.

They belong to Christ

To whom do we really belong? The sociologists tell us that one of the things that marks our society today most of all is a crisis of belonging.

To whom do we really belong? Where do we really belong?

We might say we belong to *Britain* – but many say this country is changing so fast, they don't know if they belong here any more;

(We might say we belong to *Europe* – best not to go there....)

We might say we belong to *Newnham*, to this community. But Newnham is no longer the settled village it used to be. Many come for a year or two and move on; fewer and fewer can say they really belong here.

We might say we belong to our *family*; but these days, families disperse quickly, much more quickly than they used to. Very few adults live near those who raised them. And families are fragile, families fracture and families split up. (I was speaking to a woman last week, the only child of a single mother, who's made a deliberate decision never to contact her mother again. What family does she belong to?)

And of course most of us find we belong to *many different groups* at different times of the week – we belong with our colleagues at work; we belong to Rotary, a lunch club, a Facebook Community – we belong to them all; they all compete for attention.

How easy then for the *Church* to become yet another place competing for our time, another club to be fitted in along with all the others. St Mark's - just another temporary place of belonging....

Where do we really belong?

To whom do we really belong?

If you're baptized, Paul's saying, you belong to *Christ* – before anyone, or anything else.

If you kneel at the Communion rail here, you're being reminded you belong to the one who meets you there – above all others;

Others will come and go; he will not.

Others will ask to be fitted in when we can manage them; he will not.

You belong to Christ.

And if *that's* true. Everything changes. To say "I belong to Christ; therefore, I can do whatever I like" makes no sense.

Paul spells that out for us in two ways:-

First,

1) if you belong to Christ, you won't belong to sin

Now that might sound an odd way of putting it, but remember for Paul, sin isn't basically about a whole lot of things you do – like shoplifting or cheating the taxman. It's a *power* that gets you in its grip, a force that gets hold of you and traps you, that you can't free yourself from. That's why Paul uses the image of slavery here as well – sin can enslave people, so that they start to belong to sin in the way a slave belongs to his master.

And so he sets up a stark contrast between slavery to sin, and slavery to Christ...

¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—*whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?*

The slavery that leads to death. That means longing for things you know will wreck your life. But you just can't stop yourself.

I suppose we see that most clearly in those caught up in some awful addiction. Most of us know those who are ruled by desires that are eating them up; and they know it, but they can't do anything about it. (Perhaps even in our own family.) The more they get the more they crave:

just one more swing of the handle on the fruit machine...
 just one more sniff of the powder to quell the stress...
 just one more website to satisfy the hunger for intimacy...
 just one more scotch to blur the painful memory...

This is the downward spiral of self-destruction. The other day, I watched an interview with Richard Burton where he described his own addiction to alcohol: he said "it's always November, and it's raining, it's 3 o'clock in the morning;" and the only thing you want is another drink.

A slavery that leads to death.

Of course, it needn't be as dramatic as that. Most of *us* know what it is to have longings that we know will destroy us if they get out of hand:

maybe we *long* to pump up that bank balance, to the point that little else matters;
 just one more investment, one more risky venture;

or *long* to be as successful as that sibling who always achieves so much more than us; just a bit more effort here, a bit more effort there;

or *long* for the partner we know we can't have; just one more meeting, one more email.

The longings that will kill us, if we let them. *But it's just this that Christ came to free us from* – Paul's telling us. In him, God came right into that downward spiral, right into the vortex of longings, all the way to death. There on the cross he bore the worst to give us the best. There he defeated this dreadful power that threatens to defeat us – once and for all. There the chains of sin were snapped so wouldn't be trapped.

That same Jesus meets us us at this service to offer us a power greater than anything we can muster, the power of his Spirit. That doesn't mean we'll suddenly stop sinning – if only! – but it does mean you won't be ruled by sin, we won't be sucked down by it, it won't have "dominion" (Paul's word) over us. We don't have to be a prisoner of the longings that are killing us! That's the promise.

If you belong to Christ, you won't belong to sin.

And a second thing follows from that, again spelt out here.....

2) if you belong to Christ, you belong to a pattern of life

Notice something odd in the contrast Paul makes between the two kinds of slavery. “...you used to be slaves to sin,” he says, “but now you’ve come to obey . . . *the pattern of teaching* that’s claimed your allegiance” That’s a strange thing to say, isn’t it? Why not Christ himself? *He’s* claimed your allegiance. *He’s* the one we obey surely. You belong to *Christ*, you obey *him*. That’s what Paul believes; that what he’s saying deep down in this chapter. But here he’s saying to obey Christ means obeying a *pattern of teaching*.

Why?

Well, let’s remember what I said at the start: he’s writing to those who think if they’re free from the law, anything goes; you can do whatever you like. No, says Paul. It’s not like that. Freedom always comes with a framework.

When the 17yr old passes her driving test and gets “the freedom of the road”, that doesn’t mean she gets to drive over hedges, and barge across railway lines. There’s a pattern of driving she’s learned from the instructor; not just rules (though of course that’s included) but a whole set of skills, habits to get into, good practices, ways of driving – “get into a lane like this earlier . . . signal a bit later for this kind of junction.” Ways of driving that treat the road with respect, and keep you and the others on the road safe.

When Paul talks about a pattern of teaching, that’s the kind of thing he has in mind. He’s talking about moral teaching, a pattern of teaching that leads to a pattern of life. And there’s a nice little extra touch here. The word “pattern” he uses is a word they used then for a mould into which you poured molten metal. The mould had a pattern or design on it, and the design got transferred to the metal when it cooled. When you you’re baptized into a Church, you’re poured into a pattern of life – not a shapeless niceness, a bland do-goodery, but a mould that’s engraved with distinctive lines: hospitality, patience, a love of prayer, a passion for justice. And that gets transferred to you, imprinted on you, in time. (Paul pulls them together a little under the word “holiness” (19).)

Think back to the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Who were the first responders at 2 in the morning; the first to open doors to the homeless; the first to offer food, clothes, water; the first to weep with those who weep, and yes, rage with those who raged for justice – the Churches! One of the clergy wrote online about meeting a woman on that awful night who was furious about the response of the local council. She said “you Christians have really stood by us and done what they should have done.” Through sleepless nights, and exhausting days, the Churches embodied a pattern of teaching, a pattern of life that claimed their allegiance. They didn’t have to think about it, they just did it. It’s what they were baptized into.

If you belong to Christ, you belong to a pattern of life.

A final thought. There's been a thread running right through what I've been saying that I'd sum up like this: *belonging is about longing*.

Belonging to a place means you'll long to be in that place. Belonging to someone else means you'll long to be with that person. *Real belonging is about what you long for*, deep down.

I said if you belong to Christ, *you won't belong to sin* – that means you won't *be-longing to sin*, like the addict; no, deep down, you'll start longing to do what's right

I said if you belong to Christ, *you belong to a pattern of life* – that means *you'll be-longing to live out that pattern*; it's not about having a bunch of rules out there that you grudgingly obey, but about longing to live the Christian life, deep down, “from your heart” as Paul puts it here (17).

And at the root of both of those: if you *belong to Christ*, that means you'll *be-longing for him*. If that seems a bit remote this morning, remember that your longing for him is nothing compared to his longing for you.