



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

28 June 2020: Sunday Worship

The Third Sunday after Trinity

Romans 6:12–end, Matthew 10:40–end

The Revd Philippa White, Succentor, Assistant College Chaplain, and School Chaplain

I don't know if you've noticed that over the last few weeks, since we moved from Trinity Sunday to the season of Ordinary Time, we've been hearing a sequence of readings from Romans at these services. I love Romans, especially the middle bit of really chewy argument that runs from chapters 5 to 8 – the exact bit we're reading through now.

But as I read the portion of chapter 6 that the lectionary gave us today, I realised something that, up to now, I'd always been able to ignore. I realised quite how much of a problem it is that the image Paul chooses to illustrate his argument about what it means to belong to Jesus is an image of slavery.

In recent weeks, we have been reminded yet again of the ongoing racism, pain, injustice and evil that is left worldwide even 150 years after the institution of slavery was ended in the United States. In response to recent events, it seems that a tide might be turning and the level of ongoing harm caused by the slave trade and white supremacy might be beginning to be acknowledged. And we have all been challenged to look at the ways that who we are – how we move through the world – the stories we have been told and the stories we tell ourselves – conditions how we experience the world.

Once you were slaves to sin, Paul says. The temptation is to think of ourselves as the people Paul's talking about – but let's think instead of Paul addressing those people who were and are enslaved, and who continue to suffer the effects of slavery. Because it's true: enslaved by people, they were and are also enslaved to and by sin. Those people who made other people slaves – people rather like me – in other words, were and are people operating within sinful organisations and evil ways of structuring the world; people making and encouraging sinful laws; people colluding with the evil of white supremacy (even, and importantly, without realising it).

That is, the people Paul's really talking to and about are those marginalised, oppressed, treated as property, devalued and despised. They are the ones who are straightforwardly set free: liberated from tyranny, adopted by Jesus whose service is perfect freedom.

Meanwhile those of us who are white, or well educated, or in positions of power, or have benefited from these sinful structures, are in a rather different situation. We are also bound to sinful structures and bound up with sinful structures; but we benefit from and are likely also to collude with those very same sinful structures. For us, it isn't so much a matter of slavery – of being owned and dominated – as a matter of allegiance. We are under the dominion of sin, but our power and privilege means we're able to reject it – if we choose to.

That's what I think Paul is getting at with his language of 'slavery to righteousness'. Those who are enthralled by and collude with sinful structures need to be set free, yes – but our being set free means, paradoxically, that righteousness takes over that kind of dominion. Under the dominion of Jesus, slaves to righteousness, we change our attitudes and behaviour – but this is a chosen allegiance, choosing to believe and submit to Jesus.

In other words, we don't offer allegiance any more to the narratives of sin, the institutions of the world. Sin and its dominion tells us a story: we are more important. We are worth more. We are better than other people. Other people deserve to be marginalised and we deserve to be centre stage. As Paul would say, by no means! Nobody deserves to be marginalised. Just as nobody deserves to be centre stage. We are where we are, largely, not because of our excellence, but because the sin ingrained in our world sets some people above others.

Instead we offer allegiance to Jesus who tells us a different story – a true story. That story is reflected in our gospel – where although Jesus is talking to the disciples, he's talking about someone else – the people to whom the disciples will preach. Let's see ourselves here as the 'whoever' – the people to whom Jesus is sending his friends, with the story and the challenge of the Kingdom.

If we see ourselves as those to whom the apostles will preach, then we stand in a place of tension, between two stories. The story of the world says that we deserve the good things we enjoy and that those who don't have them don't deserve them. But the apostles knock on our door to tell a different story: the story of the Kingdom, the story of Jesus, the story in which all ought to be equal, and there are certain people who need to be looked after, set free. A story in which we are

invited to offer a cup of water to the little ones – to set aside our privilege and power, and see the needs of others.

Over the last few weeks, this idea of the stories we tell ourselves about our past and our future has come into focus. Those stories have themselves become a site of tension. We have realised or been reminded that history isn't objective – that the stories we tell to and about ourselves are skewed. We are challenged to recognise the ways that sin has shaped our story and to rewrite our narrative. Jesus offers us that chance: to turn our back on the narrative of sin, to refuse to offer allegiance to white supremacy, and to offer our allegiance instead to him. To step out of the story of sin and into the story of the Kingdom. To accept the challenge to offer a cup of water to the little ones – to offer justice to the oppressed, healing to the broken, reparations to the robbed – and thus say no to the lies sin tells and say yes to the narrative of the Kingdom.

'No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness... for sin will have no dominion over you.'