

SERMON PROPER 9 JULY 2014

I have recently been reading a family saga by Elizabeth Jane Howard and I was impressed by how accurately, I felt, she had described the feelings of children, teenagers and young adults, according to my memories.

The perceived unfairness of life, the need for love and security, the need to be the centre of attention for some and the need to hide for others and then of course the responses of various adults to those very child-like emotions. And of course there is the innocence of childhood the willingness to believe in Father Christmas, to really live in a story, the imagination that can turn some scraps into a castle. To a certain extent children are selfish and self-centred, how can they not be? Part of developing as an adult is to learn that we are not the centre of the universe and others have needs as well, and that understanding can be a lesson hard learnt, or not learnt at all.

Jesus talks to the people who have listened to him and to John. The part before this Gospel reading has been about Jesus saying thank you to John for all that he has done but the crowds are restless, Jesus tells this rather ironic parable comparing them to selfish children who only want to play their game and only if they can have the starring role.

But then we hear about the other child, the one who talks to his Father, who has grown up with a chance to make his own decisions, but with his Father always there beside him, they are very intimate verses, a child who is self-giving rather than self-centred, loving and grateful rather than jealous and dis-satisfied.

The part of the letter to the Romans that we heard today is also well portrayed in novels, how many times do characters do the thing they know they shouldn't? It can, however, take a lot of honesty on our part to admit to that in ourselves. "It's naughty but nice" can cover an awful lot of sins, but usually the acceptable ones that we can discuss in public, like having that cake that's beckoning.

But it is true that particularly in our spiritual lives the more we try to do what is good because of our love for God, the more we will be tempted, the devil doesn't want good, strong Christians. Paul is aware how easy it is for us, infant Christians mostly, to give in and not do the good that we want to do, but to do the evil that we didn't want to do.

Here we need to discuss evil. It is often used to describe actions of those who are mass murderers, dictators and the like. It is a strong word. But Paul certainly isn't using it in that way. It is any time when we choose the easy way out or the thing that at the time seems to be most pleasurable, the most beneficial to us. Because those choices we are offered are part of the battle between good and evil, the battle that is going on all around us and will do until Christ comes again.

But then we are given hope; Paul says "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" And Jesus offers us the comfort of those last verses from Matthew's Gospel that we heard today. "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Probably there are those here who are struggling with problems of all sorts, there are times when it is hard to pray, hard not to be anxious, hard to trust, hard to understand God's plans. All any of us can do at those times is to be beside you, to pray for you when you cannot pray yourself. God understands, because of Jesus.

Jesus, by his death and resurrection offers us salvation, he puts us right with God. He stood alongside sinners, the ungodly, the gluttons, the drunkards and the outcasts, and in bearing their sins, he revealed the Father's loving heart.

It is easy to get hung up about part of a large picture, to focus on that to the exclusion of anything else, we can argue about doctrine, about miracles, the correct interpretation of a word, the complexities of our faith and its effect on our lives.

But Jesus shows it to be so simple, that huge picture is about God's love for us, if we join him we can be part of the relationship with the living God. If we live in God and he in us, we may still have failures, we may still have childlike tantrums, but we will also, from time to time, find rest in our souls, the peace that passes all understanding, the love that overflows, that lights up our lives and the lives of others.