

**Romans 8: 28-39 Predestination Lullingstone 23 September 2018**

*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. Amen*

Unless you're a visitor here this morning, you will know that over the summer months the Ministry Team has been preaching on our favourite Bible passages, under the title: 'Bible verses to learn and live by.' When I chose the last two verses of Romans chapter 8, I was thinking of the wonderful assertion that nothing – nothing at all – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

(i) I preached on these verses at a Baptism service in St Martin's two weeks ago, where we thought about the love we feel for our children and how we are all children of God whose love for us is so much greater even than the love that we feel for our own children.

(ii) These verses are also highly suitable today as we welcome back couples who have been married here. As we celebrate their love for each other, we learn from I John (4.7) that:

'Love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.'

And there are many, many other verses in the Bible that speak of God's love for us, and that we learn to love because God first loved us.

(iii) These verses are not just relevant for baptisms and weddings, but also funerals. When I used to write the intercessions for St Martin's, in the section where we pray for those who mourn, I would frequently use the comforting quotation 'Neither life nor death' shall be able to separate us from the love of God.' God's love surrounds us in this life and beyond. God's love is stronger than death.

Of course, our Bible readings are much longer than our favourite verses, and several of us in the ministry team have been a bit surprised to see the context in which they are written. For today's New Testament reading Gary chose verses 28 onwards, and I found that I was faced with the unenviable task of preaching on Predestination.

Listen again to verses 29 and 30:

‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.’

Predestination is described in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church as:

‘The Divine decree according to which certain persons are infallibly guided to eternal salvation.’ (1958)

The greatest theological minds have struggled with the Christian doctrine of predestination down through the ages. Alister McGrath, a modern theologian, speaks of it as ‘one of the most enigmatic and puzzling aspects of Christian theology.’ (*Christian Theology. An Introduction 2011 p365*) So I asked Gary, our Rector, to help. He explained it as ‘a paradox’ and ‘a glorious mystery’. Not so glorious (I thought) for those who are not chosen or called, not justified and glorified: those who are not predestined for salvation! Though, I must admit, that after a week of reading round this topic, I was more sympathetic to Gary’s answer. He takes a middle view between the hardliners like Calvin at the time of the Reformation, and those at the other extreme who think that ultimately all will be saved by God’s love.

I wouldn’t have chosen to preach on such a difficult topic – particularly when we have visitors in church who are not regular church-goers. And yet perhaps it’s not a bad thing for people to realise that the Bible is often very difficult, and that Christians need to study the Bible, using commentaries to understand the text against the background in which it was written. So let me tell you what I discovered about predestination.

Explicit teaching on predestination is only found in the New Testament in the writings of St. Paul, so we need to look at it in the context of Paul’s life and thought. Our reading this morning is one of two crucial passages on predestination: the other is in Ephesians chapter 1 where the word ‘predestinated’ occurs in verses 5 and 11.

Both these epistles were written late in Paul's life, when he had had time to formulate answers to some of the big theological questions thrown up by the new religion of Christianity. Romans is particularly interesting in this respect because for once he was writing to a church that he, Paul, had not set up. So he isn't keeping in touch with people he knew and dealing with particular issues that had arisen since he was with them. In the Book of Romans, he is writing to the Christians in Rome, saying that he hoped to come and visit them and setting out a systematic account of Christian belief. (Little did he know that he would indeed visit Rome, but in chains, and that he would eventually die a martyr's death there by the sword.)

Paul, like Jesus and the early Christians, was Jewish. The Scriptures taught them that the Jews were a special people chosen by God – the 'Chosen Race'. But this is what I find particularly interesting: as Judaism developed over time, a universal message entered in. The Jews came to see that being chosen wasn't so much about having privileges but having extra responsibilities. They were like a holy priesthood, with religious laws for them to keep, so that the rest of the world would be sanctified through them. I'll come back to this idea later.

The dilemma that Paul struggles with in Romans, and from which his theology develops, is to do with the Jews as the Chosen Race. Paul himself was Jewish by birth and had been brought up as a devout Pharisee. He had a great love for his own people. Even after he became the Apostle to the Gentiles, taking the Christian Gospel out into the Roman world, he always began his preaching in the local synagogue, believing that the Gospel was for the Jews first and then the Gentiles (like us). But by the late 50s and early 60s, it was clear that Judaism was never going to accept Jesus as their Messiah; and Church and Synagogue were pulling apart. And Paul comes to the conclusion that the true Israelites are not those who are Jewish by birth but those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. That these are the ones fulfilling God's plan for salvation. So the language of being called and chosen by God features strongly in his theology, but no longer refers to the Jews but to Christians. This is the background to the idea of predestination: of being chosen.

There is also another, related idea that features very strongly in Paul's theology, which we refer to as 'Justification by grace through faith'. I've preached on this here before, though admittedly four years ago! But anyone who reads Paul's Epistles will come across his contrast between 'faith and works' or 'law and grace'. It's the idea that we can't earn our salvation by keeping God's laws and doing good works, but that salvation is a gracious gift of God to those who have faith in Christ.

Paul, being a good Pharisee, had tried his best to keep all the commandments of God in the Bible. But being Jewish hadn't saved him. Paul didn't experience the joy of salvation until he met with the risen Christ in that strange dramatic experience on the road to Damascus. He describes it like this:

'And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. ... And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.' (Acts 22. 6-8, 10)

And the rest is history... This conversion experience totally changed Paul's life. He became the greatest Christian missionary, spreading this new religion throughout the Roman Empire and the known world. I often wonder where we would be without St. Paul.

But here's the thing. Paul knew that he of all people least deserved God's gracious gift of salvation. He had been an enemy of Christ. He was complicit in the death by stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in Jerusalem. When Paul's conversion experience took place, he was on his way to arrest the Christians in Syria. And so he tells us, over and over again, that we cannot earn our salvation. It's freely given by God. There is nothing we can do to deserve it. And this is how he came to his doctrine of predestination, because, if it's all down to God, then God must have chosen him. If it's all down to God, then it must be the spirit of God working in us that brings us to put our faith in Christ and by which we are saved. The problem remains: why does God save some and not others?

What makes much more sense to me is that a loving God calls everyone and offers everyone salvation, but it's up to us to accept it. It's like a gift that everyone is given, but it's up to us to open it and use it. But this does not sit well with predestination for strictly speaking, predestination leaves everything to God. Whereas, turning to Christ, putting our faith in Christ, accepting his free gift of salvation puts the onus on us rather than God.

Predestination does however make sense of the fact that some people believe in Christ, when others don't. Children brought up in loving Christian families may drift away as they grow up, or one sibling may grow stronger in the faith while another rejects it. In the past I've spoken in the past about my eldest brother who is a Quaker. Well, I had another brother who for many years was the pastor of a free Evangelical church. He had three children. The eldest was a boy who rejected his parents' religion and left home at 17. The middle child, Jenny, has always been a committed Christian and recently took a full time job in a large network of churches where she lives. The youngest, another girl, has always been ambivalent towards the Church. At Jenny's wedding, her father (my brother) gave a very good speech and he mentioned with pride her Christian faith. He said people had accused him of brain washing her! Then he said something that's always stuck in my mind. He said: 'Don't you think, if I could brainwash my children into Christianity, I would have done it for all three of them?'

But we can't coerce people into belief, and sometimes we can't explain how three children with the same upbringing in a strong Christian environment all went their separate ways. Predestination may be the answer to this.

So where does all this leave us?

Firstly: if we are blessed with faith in Christ and experience new life in him that will go beyond death – then we should give thanks with all our heart for this wonderful gift. We should never take it for granted.

Secondly: we shouldn't regard this as a privilege that makes us any better than non-believers. We should regard it as a responsibility to share the Gospel with others and to show Christ's love to others, praying that the Holy Spirit will work in them to bring them to fullness of life. We are called, like a holy priesthood, to sanctify the rest of the world,

And thirdly: we should read the Bible prayerfully and study the Bible thoughtfully, asking that God will speak to us through his written word.

And finally – to return to my nephew and nieces. The youngest is now married with two girls who go to Sunday School and she has lots of friends among the other young mums in the church. And the boy, who turned his back on it all, got married a few weeks ago – in church! It's amazing what the power of love can do!

Amen.

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