

I'm normally not too nervous when I start to preach, but I confess today that I am bit. It's because of the Royal Wedding. No, yes, it's because of Bishop Curry's sermon. I've been following the coverage in the English media this week, and it was all about how this is normal, how the Bishop's sermon is just how it is America. I read one article that said if you just go to any American Episcopal church, this is the kind of sermon that you'll hear. Powerful, rousing, energetic.

So, I feel under pressure. I'm worried if there's anybody here who's not been to church before, please don't be disappointed. If you came on the strength of that, I'm much more like the very boring English cleric that was on at the start of the wedding. That's me. I said last week, if anybody wants to talk about the wedding, please catch me afterwards because I can't get enough. I'm still wallowing in the glow. I'm always happy to talk about it.

But I better talk a bit about the passage that I want to speak on today from Romans. I want to say something about that short bit of Romans that we had, that's taken from perhaps the greatest chapter in Paul's writings, Romans chapter eight. A real purple patch in Paul's prose. He almost runs away with ideas.

At the start of the reading, if you look at it carefully, you'll see that he starts a sentence. It's not immediately obvious that he actually finishes that sentence. There's just so much that he wants to say. It's a short passage, but it's dense. To help understand what he's saying there, I just want to bring out two pairs of contrasts that we see in that reading from Romans chapter eight.

The first contrast I'll mention comes in the middle of the paragraph. St. Paul says, "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." The contrast Paul is drawing here is between a spirit of slavery and a spirit of adoption. If we're to understand the significance of what Paul is saying here, particularly what he's saying about adoption and why he draws so strongly on that metaphor, then we need to know something about how serious and complicated adoption was in the Roman culture in which he was writing this.

There were two steps in the process of adoption at that time. Both were very symbolic. For instance, in the first step, if you wanted to put a child up for adoption, you had to put the child up for sale three times. The first

two times, the child would be offered for sale, and the family would buy the child back with special copper coins. But the third time the child was put up for sale, the family wouldn't buy the child back.

There were strict legal consequences once the adoption had gone through. The adopted child lost all rights associated with their former life and gained all the rights associated with their new family. They became heirs, equal heirs with any other children to the new father's estate. In the law, the old life of the adopted person was wiped out. All records and all debts were erased and canceled, and the adopted person was regarded as a new person entering into a new life, which had absolutely nothing to do with the past.

So, you can see why St. Paul loved to draw on the language of adoption in his writings. It described perfectly what he thought was going on when people are born again by the Spirit. When we're born again, St. Paul would have us know, we start a completely new life. The old has gone. The new has come. We're adopted in the family of God with the sins of the old way wiped away and with a new promise and a new inheritance put before us.

By the Spirit, he says, we can call God Abba, Father, the same intimate term to speak of God that Jesus Himself used. It's a familiar term. It's an intimate term, a bit like the word "dad." I know that many people, there will no doubt be some here, who find this whole father imagery and language difficult. But we all, I think, have a sense of what an ideal father might look like. The ideal father offers that sense of security that all children need. A child lucky enough to be loved by a good father feels secure and confident in that love. Notice the spirit of slavery is associated with fear, but in the spirit of adoption by contract, there is no such fear.

I remember when my son Jacob was about five. We were out visiting a castle, as we used to like to do, and he'd climbed up on the ramparts, and then he called me. I turned around, and just as I was turning around, I could see that he'd thrown himself at me. So, thankfully, I caught him, and we both landed in a heap. I said, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Because you're my dad." There was no fear. Perhaps there should have been. I certainly hope he doesn't try it again now.

As Christians, we're adopted as God's children. We're adopted into His family. That's a relational phrase.

That's the kind of way in which the New Testament encourages us to think about how we relate to God. Our identity as Christians isn't defined primarily by what we do or even what we believe. It's defined by how we relate to God. We become Christians as the Spirit is at work in us, and we're born again and adopted into God's family. When we come to call God "Father," that's the mark of a Christian.

Becoming a Christian is not like becoming a vegetarian. I'm not a vegetarian. I have nothing against vegetarians. In fact, I have to be sensitive here because I'm sitting very close to one. I don't know what I'm talking about here particularly, but I imagine that when you become a vegetarian, it's a matter of the will. You decide one day, "I'm not going to eat meat again." And that's fine. But it's different to how we become a Christian.

Becoming a Christian is not a matter of the will. One doesn't simply decide, "Oh, I'm a Christian." Of course, there are elements of the will. There's an element of decision. But as I say, the distinguishing mark, what happens is, as we make that decision, as we turn to Christ, so the Spirit of God comes into us, and we are born again. It's a spiritual transformation. We can draw on all the resources of God by His Spirit to live that life that we have chosen, that we have decided to follow. The Spirit of God comes and lives within us and makes a difference and enables us to walk that way.

The second contrast in this passage is between those who, Paul says, "live according to the flesh and those who are led by the Spirit." What does it mean to be led by the Spirit? Being led is not always thought of as a good thing. I heard a story recently of a young woman who applied for a college, but her heart sank when she read the college application form, particularly the question that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being a very honest and conscientious person, she wrote, "No" and thought, "Well, that's it. No change there." Sent the application off. Several months later, she was delighted to receive a letter from the college, which began as follows: "Dear Applicant, a study of the application forms reveals that this year our college has 1,452 new leaders. We're accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

Sometimes it's good to be led. Did you ever see the pelicans at the seashore, the way they fly in groups, in formation, in a V shape? Like the geese, they do that because it's much easier to follow. It's much easier on

them to be led. I discovered this week that the heart rate of a pelican flying solo is significantly higher than the heart rate of a pelican flying in a group. How anyone can ever find that out, I don't know. But I read it on the internet, so it must be true. So, next time you see a pelican flying on its own, tell it to get with its mates. Their heart rate would drop significantly and how much happier they'd be, being led.

So much easier to follow someone in front, to be guided. That's the promise before us that God, by his Spirit, leads us. We don't have to do it all ourselves. We don't have to rely on our resources. We can be led by the Spirit of God, which dwells within us.

When we live by the Spirit, we look to be led by the Spirit. Jesus promised that He would dwell with His disciples by His Holy Spirit. He doesn't leave us alone. He comes to us by His Spirit. Which follows from what I was saying earlier about the relational side of faith, about the way we can draw close to God and call on Him and know Him as Abba, Father, to relate in that close, intimate way. God is not remote. He's close by. He wants to know us. He wants to draw us into relationship to him. He leads us, speaks to us, guides us. There's a living, vibrant side to faith. It's not just about assenting to a certain set of beliefs, acting in a certain way. It's about entering into a relationship with a God who made us, who loves us, and about that relationship growing and developing.

We can come to know God and know His will for us. We can come to recognize the voice of God, the leading of His Spirit at work within us. Which seems to me to be a good place to finish on this Trinity Sunday. Of course, the Trinity's not an easy thing to understand. But the most important and significant thing about the Trinity is easy to grasp, namely that the God who is triune, who lives in trinity, is a God of love. God is love. We worship a God who's made up of the relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We should think of God more like a family than anything else.

And we remember today that, through the work of the Son and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into that relationship with the Father that the other members of the Trinity enjoy. That's our privilege to be drawn into that family. What an amazing thought, that we too can be adopted as God's children.

Amen.