

Well, we're back looking at the book of Romans today, and we find Paul here in deep theological argument. In fact, wherever you dip into Romans, you'll find Paul in deep theological arguments. Here, he's ruminating on the implications of the resurrection of Jesus, which seems like a good thing to pick up in this post Easter season. Let me read verse four.

"We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life." And I'm drawn to that phrase, "So we too may walk in newness of life." And I want to spend a few moments just exploring what that might mean.

There's a contrast at the heart of this passage, between the newness of resurrection life and the death of the old self to sin. The old self, Paul says, was crucified with Christ so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin.

He sums up what he's saying at the end of our reading in verse 11. "So you must consider yourselves dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus." This language would have been much easier for his first hearers to understand, because they were used to baptism being quite different to how we understand baptism today.

The baptisms in those days would have been nearly always adults, coming from a pagan background and they would have been put down into the river, right under the water. They would be held under the water for several seconds, so that when they came up as that symbol of rising to new life, they would be gasping for air. So, they would be pushed under and come up rising to new life. The symbolism of the old life being put to death, and that rising to new life in Jesus Christ.

An image that we might understand better comes from someone called Stuart Briscoe, who was a young Marine who was drafted to serve in the Korean war. There, he came under the control of a particularly imposing sergeant major, who strode

around the barracks, inducing fear and trembling into quite tough men.

Briscoe didn't realize how dominant this sergeant major had become in his life, until he was released from the Marines. On the day of his release, he went out for a cup of coffee and he saw the sergeant major walking towards him, and he started to jump up because he was slouching.

Then he realized that he had died to that sergeant major. He wasn't literally dead, and neither was the commanding officer. But as far as the man's domination of his life was concerned, it had come to an end. So, he went back to slouching and enjoyed his new life as a former Marine. To put what had happened in the language of St. Paul, Briscoe was a new creation. The old had gone, the new had come.

What is this newness of life? What does it mean to be alive to God? Imagine for a moment, the scene in the living room. There's a large plant in the corner of the room. It's alive, but not in the same way as the woman who's sitting on a sofa, reading a book. The woman is alive in a different way to the plant. They're both living, but only one is fully alive.

What St. Paul is talking about here is, a quality of life that's different to other types of existence. He's talking about a new quality of life, that comes as a gift from God. You can be alive, but you could be living without experiencing the new life that St. Paul is describing in these verses.

Newness of life is not taking on certain rituals, it's not doing certain things, behaving in a certain way. It's a quality of life that only those who are born of the Spirit of God can experience.

In verse five, St. Paul uses an interesting botanical term to describe this experience. He talks about being united with Christ. And the word he uses there for united is a Greek word, that as I say, comes from botany, it's about being grafted. This word, a botanist would use to describe grafting one plant on to another.

It reminds me of the language in John's gospel, where Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the vine and you are the branches," The branches that are grafted onto me, he's saying.

As we're born into newness of life. So we are United joined with Christ Jesus, we're grafted onto him. His spirit flows into us and gives us life, as the sap throat flows through the vine to the branches. So we walk in newness of life, energized by the Spirit.

Living this new life is a dynamic process. We're constantly being made new by the Spirit who dwells within us. Saint Paul says in chapter 12, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And I've experienced something of this process in my mind, in the last couple of weeks. I feel that my thinking is being transformed, when thinking about the complex issues of race.

I've read a couple of books in recent weeks on this subject, that have opened my eyes and helped me to start seeing things in a new way. For instance, I've always thought that we should aim to be colorblind, pretend that we don't see different colors and not talk about race. But of course, that's suits a white person.

I've come to understand that racism is not about sins of commission, it's not about saying certain words or being overtly prejudiced. Racism is largely sins of omission. It's about what's not said, not talking about race, not confronting the status quo, and continuing to enjoy the benefits of white privilege as if that was somehow normal and acceptable.

Slowly, as I read and think and talk, I can feel my mind being renewed, and I want to walk into a deeper understanding of the importance of race in our society. We're all being shaken up. We're all being encouraged to think in different ways by the events and circumstances we see going on around us. We're being forced to change, and walk in new ways. Standing still doesn't seem to be an option.

A friend of mine was once driving in the Australian Outback, on a particularly bad dirt road. He saw a sign which read, "Choose your rut carefully, because you might be in it for the next 30 miles." We've all been shaken out of our ruts. I've been a rector a long time, I know how hard it is to change things in church life.

But look at what's happened to us in the last few months. We've moved our worship online. We're starting to worship outside. We've changed the times of the services. Small examples of how we're on the move. We're being forced to change and adapt.

Let's be thinking as a church, as individuals, as a nation about where we want to be heading, given that we're all on the move, as we walk in this newness of life. Let's walk away from some things, there are things that we want to leave behind, and let's walk towards God and his Kingdom.

I've one last thing to say about the passage, a little word that appears in our reading, and that word is we. It says, "So that we too might walk in newness of life." At every turn we're forced these days, it would seem, to make binary choices between us and them. Between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. Between Fox News and CNN. Between liberal and conservative.

St. Paul would have us know that life is not made up of binary choices like that. There is a different way, His way. We are all one in Christ Jesus. We walk together.

I've just read a great book by Miles McPherson, pastor of the Rock Church here in San Diego, it was called The Third Option. And in it, he tells the story of two men. One of them, Officer Andrew Collins, was a police officer from Benton Harbor, Michigan. And one day he woke up, started his beat and said to himself, "I'm going to make sure I make a drug arrest today."

Unfortunately, a black man named Jameel McGee happened to be walking down the street as Collins passed by, and the officer arrested him for drug dealing. McGee loudly proclaimed his innocence, and was eventually sent to prison for his alleged crime. After four years, Officer Collins, who is white, admitted to completely fabricating the report.

"I lost everything," McGee said. "So, my only goal when I got out was to hurt him." Officer Collins served 18 months for theft, planting evidence and fabricating reports. Jameel McGee served four years for a crime he didn't commit. And after they released both stayed in Benton Harbor, and in 2015, both men found themselves working at the same Christian cafe.

Ex-Officer Collins on seeing McGee said, "Honestly, I have no explanation. All I can do, is say, I'm sorry, please forgive me." "And that was pretty much all I needed to hear," McGee said. He accepted the apology. Once grace was extended, all was forgiven. And the men eventually became friends, and went around talking about the power of forgiveness.

And James McGee explained that he didn't only forgive to help himself, or even for the sake of Andrew Collins. "But for our sake," he said. And not just our sake, by our sake, he meant that he forgave for the sake of the broader community. McGee had a broader understanding of we.

That's a great story of hope. It doesn't have to be us versus them. We're all in this together. We can choose together to walk in newness of life. Let's start within our families and within our church, we can reach out and seek forgiveness for the things we've said and done, which have hurt people.

May God give us the grace to walk in newness of life together, and may we be fully alive to God in Christ Jesus. Amen.