

As I was preparing for the sermon this week, I came across a debate in New Testament studies that I had not encountered before. It began in 1950, when a scholar called John Knox wrote a book in which he said that St Paul reveals himself in his letters to be a man without empathy and completely devoid of any sense of humor. And this created something of a backlash with scholars lining up to point out the funny things in St Paul's letters.

I must say they didn't convince me. Even the article I read that said that to grasp Paul's humor, you had to read the letters and imagine them being read in the voice of Lenny Bruce. However, whilst not being convinced that St Paul would have survived as a standup comedian, I was persuaded that St Paul was not the cold, unemotional rationalist portrayed by John Knox. I think that the passage we had read today from the book of Romans is all that's needed to prove Knox wrong.

In these verses we see St Paul reveal his vulnerability as he writes about his struggles and frustrations in ways which I'm sure we can all understand. He says, "I don't understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very things I hate." As a golfer, I know exactly what he means. I can have a lesson, stand next to a coach, be taught to swing in a certain way and hit it beautifully straight. Then I go to the range on my own and the ball goes all over the place.

St Paul knows that we can be saved, we can be forgiven, we can be trying our best to walk God's ways and we can still go astray and do things we regret. To use an old-fashioned word, the term sanctification is an ongoing process. We don't get to be holy quickly. Even as we do our best to live up to our calling as followers of Jesus, we continue to be entangled by sin or to put it in the words of St Paul, "Now, if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." And there's another word that sounds a touch old fashioned, sin. It's not a word that as Episcopalians we like to use very often. It can sound to us, too harsh and unsophisticated and we associate it with

judgment, shame and hellfire. Sin has become a word that jerks us away from God, rather than drawing us into God's arms.

There was a church in the South, I'm pretty sure it wasn't Episcopalian, but it used to advertise the titles of its sermons for the coming week on a board outside. Now the title for this week, in particular was, "Tired of sin? Come to church on Sunday." Underneath which some wag had written, "If not, then ring 619 230 476."

In our desire to avoid an unhealthy obsession with sin, we've developed our own new vocabulary. We make poor choices or we make mistakes. British MPs have their own vocabulary. They don't sin, they merely have peccadilloes. But I think we lose something by watering down what St Paul and the New Testament understand by the word sin, which is a cosmic power, so insidious that it twists and deforms us both as individuals and as societies. As ironic as it sounds, Christianity liberates us with a truth that cuts before it heals. And the truth is that sin is a deadly destructive force against which we are powerless and helpless, apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

St Paul gives us here the language to talk of an experience that we all know something about. As the great theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "Abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, defamation and death, no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them and increase our denial of their presence in our lives. Ironically, it would also weaken the language of grace since the full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven."

I'm reminded of the first step in the 12-step program used in Alcoholics Anonymous, which is based on Christian principles and which has changed lives all over the world. Step one is this. We admitted, we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. St Paul would recognize that language. He expresses his

powerlessness over sin. He said, "I want to do what is good, but evil lies close at hand. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but another law is at war in my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in me. Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?"

There's a certain liberation in such an expression of powerlessness, even St Paul, that great apostle of the church, the great hero of the faith, even he doesn't feel the need to keep up an illusion of perfection. Even he can be honest about his failings. He didn't feel the need to hide his vulnerability and he could be honest about his failings. He writes elsewhere of an image he uses to describe himself as a clay jar with treasure within. And I think that's a great way of understanding ourselves. It speaks of the fact that we are both beautiful and broken. We're made in God's divine image but enslaved to something that works against our efforts to do good and to be good. We're clay jars with treasure within and aren't we all being reminded in this present time of our own vulnerability and powerlessness. Now more than ever, we're being reminded of how ridiculous it is to think that we are in control of our lives.

There are forces beyond our control and St Paul reminds us that one such force is the power of sin. To use the word sin is to insist on something more profound and clarifying than, "I make mistakes or I have issues." To use the word sin is to understand that we need Jesus Christ to be more than just a good role model or life coach or mentor. We need Jesus to save us, to break an ancient and malevolent power, which we cannot break by ourselves. Embracing St Paul's vulnerable take on sin gives us a viable place to begin, a freeing place to stand. To confess as St Paul does, that we are wretched in the face of sin's power and lost without the cross, is a solid starting point for living a joyful, spiritual, spirit filled life and see how our passage ends. "Who will rescue me?" Paul says. He doesn't say what or how, but who. St Paul knows better than to ask, "What do I need to do to be free from this power of sin?" He knows there's nothing that he can do.

The answer instead lies in the person of Jesus Christ, which leads me to conclude by referring to our gospel reading. We read there of Jesus' wonderful invitation, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." It's not an invitation for the well behaved or the holy, but to the weary and those with heavy burdens. It's offered to those who just can't make it on their own, no matter how hard they try. So may each of us find the liberation of being able to admit our weakness and find the joy of the rest and salvation that comes in the person of Jesus Christ.

Amen.