

I wonder if when you were at school, you remember having to do compare and contrast essays. I know I had to do them in England. I'm sure it's the same over here. You were given two topics, and you had to compare and contrast them and work out the various strengths and weaknesses. And topics would include things like chemistry versus biology, or Mars versus the Earth, a microwave versus the oven. A contemporary example would be life before COVID and life after COVID. Well, actually that would be a bit depressing to think about that. I think that's best left unwritten. That essay.

But I mentioned this because in the passage we're looking at today from Romans, St. Paul offers us an exercise in comparing and contrasting. He compares the spirit of slavery with the spirit of adoption. He writes in verse 15, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption."

So let's look at the contrast that St. Paul draws between these two things. Firstly, the spirit of slavery. Paul's picking up here on a theme he first introduced in chapter six of Romans, where he encourages his readers not to be enslaved to sin. Paul's drawing here on imagery that would be familiar to his readers in that Roman culture where slavery was a part of that culture as it had been for centuries before and sadly as it was for centuries after. Although the slavery that Paul was familiar with in Rome is different to what we might think of as that very, a significant period in American history when there was slavery.

I won't get into drawing out the differences or indeed to the question of Paul's apparent indifference to the notion of slavery. That's a bigger subject for another day. Suffice to say at this point, that while slavery has taken on very different forms over the centuries, it's always an abhorrent system that's based largely on fear.

Slaves are always fearful of their masters because they're at the mercy of their masters. They live in fear of what punishment their master might seem

to inflict. Those enslaved to sin have a profound fear of death. Fear is a great way to control people. We know from our own times that fear can limit and inhibit us. A slave lives in a constant state of fear. A slave can't plan for the future. They simply hope to get through the day without pain or punishment.

And St. Paul contrasts this spirit of slavery with the spirit of adoption, in which there is no fear. "Through the work of the Holy Spirit," Paul says, "We are adopted as God's children."

Verse 15 continues, "When we cry Abba Father, that is the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And as children, unlike slaves, we do not fall back into fear."

I hadn't thought before this week of the connection between fear and fatherhood. But as I was preparing for this sermon, I was reminded of an incident that happened to me and our family many years ago when we were visiting a great castle in Warwick, which is in the middle of England, you overhear would say "Warwick", but Warwick has a terrific castle with enormous ramparts. And my son, Jacob, who was aged about four, was having a great time running all over the ramparts of the castle.

And suddenly I heard him cry out, so I turned. And he said, "Watch me". And at that moment, he jumped on me from a great height. Thankfully, I caught him, and we fell into a heap on the ground. And as I got up, I said, "Jacob, why did you do that?" And he said, "Because you're my dad."

He was at that glorious and all too brief period of life, when he thought I knew everything and I could do everything. He had complete trust in me and absolutely no fear. And that's something about what St. Paul is getting at here as he refers to God as our father,

He talks about God not just as father, but he uses a very particular word, "Abba", that Jesus himself had used an Aramaic word, which is an intimate

term for father, one that would only be used in the context of the family. And Jesus invites us to pray to God as Abba Father. It's a metaphor that has limitations. Of course, it's not suggesting that God is male. And as we know, it's a metaphor that not everybody finds helpful, but it's important because it's a personal and not an abstract way to imagine and talk about God.

St Paul, like Jesus before him, invites us to use personal language about God, because as Christians, we're invited to explore developing a relationship with God, a relationship which is built on trust, the kind of trust a child has in a parent, the kind of trust that leads to abandonment, throwing ourselves into the loving arms of God, knowing he will be there to care for us and support us.

I liked the way that J.B. Phillips translates this verse, "All who follow the leading of God's spirit are God's own children, nor are you meant to relapse into the old slavish attitude of fear. You have been adopted into the very family circle of God. And you can say with a full heart, "Father, my father."

St. John writes, "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God." And that is what we are. We are deeply loved by our heavenly Father. And as we know, perfect love casts out fear.

We may not all have experienced it or understand it, but one of the clearest examples we have in our human experience of perfect love is the relationship between a parent and a child, where love knows no bounds, where love is completely unconditional and where trust is complete.

So in an ideal parent/child relationship, the child has no fear. And also, unlike a slave, the child has the promise of an inheritance. A slave has no rights. A slave has no prospects. A slave has no privileges. A slave is stuck in an unending cycle. Whereas a child, on the other hand, has prospects. A child has promises. A child can look forward to

their future, with things on the horizon. A child is a participant, a full participant, in a family.

As St. Paul says, "If children, then heirs." And he goes on, "We suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with him."

The inheritance we have as Christians is life eternal, life in all its fullness, the life of the Spirit, which leads beyond the grave, to the glory of heaven.

And the next verse in this chapter, the great chapter of Romans eight, which will begin with next week, it spells this out. Paul writes, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory which is to be revealed to us. On some glorious day, the family of God will be united as one in the kingdom of heaven."

As I conclude, I want to say that this passage would seem to me to have much to teach us in this time of pandemic. It reminds us that we're not called to return to being slaves to fear. We have been liberated from fear. That doesn't mean we should be reckless.

If Jacob, now that he's 24 and weighing nearly 200 pounds, jumped on me, we'd both be killed. That would be reckless. We don't need to be reckless, but neither do we need to be in bondage to fear. God is with us, and He will accompany us through life's dark days. We can trust him because he's our dad.

Also, this passage reminds us to keep a broader perspective on life. We must remember that this world of pain and suffering, this physical world, is not all there is. There is a spiritual realm. Suffering and death will never have the last word. As children of God, we have a glorious inheritance.

Amen.