

Genesis 22:1 -14

Psalm 13

Romans 6: 12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Which way to life?

From time to time we could add some interest to the service by introducing a quiz. A colleague suggested we should offer a prize for whoever can discover a link between the lectionary readings. On certain days there is one further possibility. What connection is there between the graphic on the Order of Service and the theme for the day? This is one of those days when the choice of the graphic was overtaken by a change in theme, so if you can find a link today, it will be a miracle!

The theme that presents itself from Romans is the distinction between living according to law as against living under grace. This is a deep and central theme in Paul and it has played a huge part in our Reformed heritage, especially through Martin Luther. By Law Paul certainly means the Mosaic law, given by God for humans to follow. By life under the Law he means a way of life in which we order ourselves according to its principles. The original intention of the Law was God's call to life and freedom, but what Paul says in Romans is that this same holy and good law was in fact powerless to bring us the salvation and life we hope for. Instead, the effect of the law was to bring to light the ways in which we miss the mark. Instead of setting us free, the law revealed that in God's sight we are all guilty of living in sin. What Paul understands by sin is not moral peccadilloes or the lusts of the body. Sin is a state of being in which we are enslaved to seeking after self-justification. Sin is the addiction to one thing: the project of ourselves. For Paul sin, law and death go together because Law had become a symbol of our upward striving, driven by our desire to scale God's throne for ourselves. For Paul the problem with Law is that even with the investment of pious zeal, keeping the law fails to break our solidarity with the power that has alienated us from God. The deeper problem Paul is getting at is that the premise behind law keeping misconstrues who God is for us. In order to change we have to come to a new apprehension of God and on that basis, find a new way of living in relationship with God.

The counter position Paul offers is life under grace. Under grace God is not one who legislates and expects outcomes. God is one who makes promises and bestows gifts which put right the relationship between us, opening the way to a new life. Paul is quite clear that God's gifts are dependant only on God's giving, not our moral state. Even in the imperfect state of profound self-seeking, we are still subject to God's gracious promises. Even as sinners we are called to a life of grateful and trustful living, honouring God, not as law keepers who are earning their way, but as those who have accepted and chosen to live in the promises offered by God.

The argument of Romans 6, touched on last week as well as this, shows that life under grace does not mean ignoring the enduring power of sin. Paul's view of life is that the world is a place in which we are inherently trapped by our craving after self-justification. But in Christ a new kind of promise has emerged. Life has been shown to triumph over sin and death, and a life of promise stands on offer to us. There is a new

hope - a new possibility in which we may live. In view of this opportunity, what are we to do? Paul utilises a bold metaphor: the life style God's grace calls for involves a new form of enslavement: life which is totally engaged with God's promise of life for us, rather than a life focussed on self-concern.

This complicated argument serves to distinguish two options for life. Life under law, which means continuing to be trapped in self-achievement. Or life under grace which, while it knows the lure of human achievements, is prepared to trust, every day, in the promises of God.

Luther emphasised the distinction between these two ways. His experience was that, no matter how much and how often he confessed his sin, he did not feel at peace with God or himself. He realised he did not have the strength to confess every sin he had committed so peace with God was always going to elude him. It was when he learned from Paul that what he sought had been done for us by God in Christ that Luther found himself set free. He wrote -

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but the one expression "the justice of God". I took it to mean that justice whereby God punished the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner, troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to St Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is "God's way of righting wrong", through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the JUSTICE OF GOD filled me with hate, now ...this passage from Paul became... a gate to heaven...

A fresh apprehension of God changed Luther's life. Fearful living was replaced by life lived in freedom as a glad response to the forgiveness of God.

There is a connection between this thought and the events in the life of Abraham and Isaac read today. Sarah and Abraham lived in the promises of God and, now that they had a son of their own flesh, the future seemed assured. But God demanded a gross sacrifice. Of all Abraham's tests this is the most demanding. It is possible that once the promised heir had been delivered they could be tempted to abandon God and trust the future to the children Isaac will give him. The test seems designed to uncover whether Abraham really has yielded his life to the promises of God. What is tested is not Abraham's knowledge, but his devotion. The test reveals what stands first in Abraham's heart. He is willing to lose his future to God and he gains it once more, without any sign that he would. There are many things we might want to object to in this story, but we cannot turn away from this point: Abraham continued to trust God, when there seemed no reason to do so.

If we could reprint the graphic for today, it would be a picture of the journey towards the sacrifice, but with a hidden Christological reference. We would see the two on the way, with the wood and the knife and the donkey. And we would also see the ram caught in the thicket - a protosign of the Lamb of God who allowed himself to be caught up in life with us, in order to establish a new relationship between us and God. Jesus Christ suffered the ultimate test, and died trusting only in the power of God to heal and bring life. From him we learn what it means to have hope when no hope is to be seen. And from him we see how futile is trusting in anything other than God. The death and

resurrection of Jesus is a sure sign that God is faithful, even when we cannot see it. It is this that reopens the future for us, and makes it possible for us to live our life with passion and hope. Thanks be to God for the gift of grace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.