

10 am Parish Communion Sunday 21 June 2026

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Romans 6:1b-11 and Matt 10:24-39 – ***How does being freed by Christ from slavery to sin work out in practice?***

One of the most enduring images of recent times is the photograph taken on Bloody Sunday in 1972 showing Father Edward Daly, waving a white handkerchief and seeking to take to safety the people who are carrying the dying teenager Jack Duddy. With the future of the peace talks in the Middle East looking very fragile, we need courageous and compassionate Christians to step into the fray, to seek to understand the origins of the hatred and extremism that erupted into violence and trauma in Belfast recently, and, it seems, in Edinburgh this weekend.

The popular narrative of our times is that society is becoming increasingly polarised as we lose the capacity to listen to one another. But today's readings tell us that when it comes to the struggle for our souls, the middle ground is not the safest place to be. Quite the contrary, the middle ground is no-man's land, and it can never be a sanctuary.

When it comes to the spiritual battle for our hearts and lives, we do have to pick a side. Like Jeremiah, we need to acknowledge that the Lord will ***test the righteous, [and can] see the heart and the mind***, and we need to be able to say to the Lord ***to you I have committed my cause***. The consequences of not doing so are too serious. Jesus told his disciples, ***Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.***

We cannot hedge our bets.

A fortnight ago a local supermarket in Berwick-on-Tweed, on the border of Scotland and England, discovered that the pragmatic approach might backfire. They launched a football shirt which was white for England on the right-hand-side and blue for Scotland on the left-hand-side. It did not go down well. We do need to pick a side.

But the good news is that we are not on our own in our exertions to be on the side of Christ, and to live in the way that pleases him. Because Christ, by dying to sin and being raised from the dead, has defeated sin and death, we have been released from the penalty of sin, and we have the Holy Spirit to help us to fight the power of sin in our lives, even though, until Christ returns, we will continue to live in the presence of sin. We're not free from sin's ability to tempt us, but we are free from its right to kill us. So in choosing Christ, we're choosing the one who's redeemed us from the slavery of sin and given us the Holy Spirit to help us to fight the battle to keep sin out of our lives.

In Chapter 6 of Romans Paul explains how Christ's story has become our story. ***Our old self was crucified*** and was ***buried with [Christ]***; so that ***we might no longer be enslaved to sin but might be freed from sin***. And since we know that ***we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Christ and will be united in a resurrection like his***. And meanwhile, until we are with Christ in his kingdom, ***we walk in newness of life***. So the challenge we face, in the here and now, until our death, or Christ's return (whichever comes first), is to ***[reckon] ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ***. Because Christ does not co-exist with sin. Christ cannot – he will not – co-exist with sin, in our lives, or in our hearts.

So what does this mean in practice? When the objective reality is that we have been **freed from [the penalty of] sin**, but we're not yet free from the power of sin? It means that living in that reality is still a struggle. We will still get angry; we will still act selfishly. We still find it hard to live without sin in our hearts; we still find it difficult to **walk in newness of life**.

In chapter 5, just before our reading from Romans, Paul explained how God, in his grace, freed us from the power of sin by sending Jesus to suffer in our place for our sin. In our reading today we heard Paul say that that raises the obvious question: if sin attracts God's grace, why don't we simply continue in sin, and even double-down on sin, so that we can experience even *more* of God's grace? **That grace may abound?** After all, we might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb....

But Paul tells us that the idea we'd *want* to continue in sin, just because we knew that God, in his grace, could save us from our sin, is bonkers. **By no means!** says Paul. The very idea is as daft as suggesting that anybody receiving an effortlessly-effective new mop for the kitchen floor, would then invent increasingly bizarre ways of making their kitchen floor filthy, such is their confidence that there's nothing that their new floor-mop can't handle. Whereas, anybody with a kitchen floor that is brighter and shinier than ever before will want just to enjoy it, not to keep on ruining it. That is why, to the question why grace doesn't lead to more and more sin, or worse and worse sin, Paul's answer is: **how can we who [have] died to sin go on living in it?**

We don't *want* to go on living in the way we used to, but old habits die hard. The work of re-ordering our priorities and putting Christ first is surprisingly exhausting. Driving self-centredness and our own gratification out of our lives means re-committing ourselves to remembering that we are **dead to sin and alive to God in Christ**; it means reminding ourselves – and one another - that we do **walk in newness of life**.

We do that through confession in our services. We do it by setting aside a few minutes every day; in the morning, in the evening, when we're walking the dog, or doing a spot of weeding... We find time to turn our thoughts to God. To remember that even though we've been **freed from sin**, it is still helpful for us to name in our hearts those thoughts, and words, and deeds, that we regret and are sorry for. Naming them for what they are; that is important.

But it means too that we mustn't hold too close to us the things that feel important to us. If we hug them to us as if they could keep us warm, they will only get in the way of us opening our hearts up to Christ and receiving the love that he wants to give to us. Christ's love is stronger, deeper, and purer than any human love. Deeper than the love for husband or wife; stronger than the love for any friend; purer than the love for son or daughter. It is very easy to look for meaning and purpose in caring for an ageing parent or for children. But our true meaning and purpose is to be found in following Christ. If we find our life in the gifts, rather than the Giver, we will lose it. It is when we put the Giver above the gifts that he gives us – when we are willing, for the sake of the Giver, to lose such life as they might offer to us – it is then that we will find our life.