

Thought for the Week 28th June 2020

Reading: Romans 6.12-23

¹²Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to its lustful desires. ¹³Do not let any part of your body become a tool of wickedness, to be used for sinning. Instead, give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life. And use your whole body as a tool to do what is right for the glory of God. ¹⁴Sin is no longer your master, for you are no longer subject to the law, which enslaves you to sin. Instead, you are free by God's grace.

¹⁵So since God's grace has set us free from the law, does this mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! ¹⁶Don't you realize that whatever you choose to obey becomes your master? You can choose sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God and receive his approval. ¹⁷Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you have obeyed with all your heart the new teaching God has given you. ¹⁸Now you are free from sin, your old master, and you have become slaves to your new master, righteousness.

¹⁹I speak this way, using the illustration of slaves and masters, because it is easy to understand. Before, you let yourselves be slaves of impurity and lawlessness. Now you must choose to be slaves of righteousness so that you will become holy.

²⁰In those days, when you were slaves of sin, you weren't concerned with doing what was right. ²¹And what was the result? It was not good, since now you are ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. ²²But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Prayer [Revd Richard Church, URC Deputy Secretary (Discipleship)]

Here in the familiar place, we come to you. Here in a familiar way, we bring our prayers. Here in our time, we want to meet with you, the Eternal One, and with the unseen company on earth and in heaven.

Yet you, Lord, startle us with the fullness of your life, and the lengths to which you go in searching us out.

We are poor disciples - yet we often pretend not to be. We come as part of a compromised and compromising society, our warm worship words often conceal cold hearts, our passion for justice stops short of our own doors, we have set out on your way but have allowed ourselves to be diverted. We ask to be set right, with you and therefore with each other, In the name of Jesus who endured the cross to bring us back to life. Amen.

Here is the good news...God knows us, God, in Jesus, offers a new beginning, God the Holy Spirit gives power from within, to renew our walk with him, in the confidence that we are loved, thanks be to God! Amen.

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In today's reading Paul uses the imagery of slavery – something which was so much part of the background to daily life in the Roman Empire that most people (apart from the slaves) probably didn't think about it much, and until recently neither did most of us. For the past few weeks I've been enjoying a "A house through time" on BBC2, looking at history through the lens of the inhabitants of a particular house in Bristol, whose original owner was a sea captain heavily involved in the slave trade. David Olusoga, the presenter, made the point that at that time even something we take so much for granted as sugar was produced by slaves in the Caribbean ... and later residents in the house included a domestic slave, whom records reveal to have run away, possibly to go to sea and find freedom. Art of the time shows young slave boys as the latest fashionable accessory, but they were written out of history, their stories never told, the only names recorded being those their owners gave them.

Slavery has been in the news recently, with the toppling of the statue of the slave trader in Bristol, and apologies from some major companies for their historic links with colonialism and the slave trade. It had been easy for most of us to think of slavery as consigned to the past, an uncomfortable piece of history with no relevance to the way we live now, but the Black Lives Matter demonstrations have raised awareness that many people are still living with the consequences in terms of discrimination, reduced opportunities and structural injustice, and that something needs to be done about it *now*.

It's been encouraging to see the mainly peaceful demonstrations uniting people from across communities in a search for justice and change, with the symbolic "taking the knee" as a sign of commitment and protest. I was disappointed to hear it dismissed flippantly by a member of the Cabinet as being something out of "Game of Thrones", particularly as the gesture pre-dates the popular fantasy series by decades, and has particular resonance - with Martin Luther King taking the knee in prayer at a civil rights rally. But while the politician had reservations about the gesture, which he saw as a sign of subjection, I would see it as the opposite, as the expression of a free choice – a choice to work for freedom from the mistakes of the past, a choice to work for a better and more inclusive future, and a choice to work together with others and listen to their voices rather than to assume that we know and can provide what is needed.

It's a symbolic gesture – but Jesus himself knew the importance of gestures ... turning the other cheek, turning over the tables in the Temple, asking a woman at a well for a cup of water ... Perhaps that's one reason why when we worship together we "assume the position", heads bowed and hands together. Sometimes a movement can express what we feel inside for others, of solidarity, of commitment, it can prepare us inwardly, enable us to put aside the other matters on our minds so we can become more focused on what is important, our meeting with God. And having committed ourselves to meeting with God can open up new, creative possibilities in response when we're no longer clouded by self-righteousness or preconceived ideas, feelings of inadequacy or worries.

So let's "take the knee" before God and offer him our prayers, our thoughts, our lives for him to use to bring justice, healing, and forgiveness so that all people may be free to know the life he wants them to have.