

## Romans 7:15-25

In a few weeks' time I will be 60. I was born in 1957. Macmillan was Prime Minister, and Eisenhower was the US President. It was the year *West Side Story* opened on Broadway. It was another time altogether. In 1957 no-one had heard of the Beatles or Bananarama, of Harry Potter, or the world wide web. I have had other birthdays... well, clearly, 59 of them, and I have not been bothered. This one has me rattled. My family normally buy me books or bottles of wine for my birthday. They are threatening me with walking sticks and Sanatogen. No more vintage wine to lay down; because apparently I will not have time to drink it. Now, I know there are plenty of you here who do not think that 60 is old. But, it is a watershed. I can have a senior rail card and free prescriptions (my family think I will need that). People ask me about retirement. If I was on Facebook I suspect I would need to update my status.

Actually, this is precisely about my status. The years do not matter. I don't notice the age. I *do* notice sometime, not just yet, I will not be Dean and my status will change. I am just beginning to think about that. And today there is another status change with choristers leaving the choir. They will always be the people that once did this amazing, extraordinary thing. They go on *being* choristers, but today they stop *doing* it. It is not just me that has to think about status.

We will come back to the choir. We are going to get very thoughtful and look at that passage from *The Epistle to the Romans*.

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate* Romans 7:15

Now, first things first. This was a letter written for people who knew all about status. Paul was an expert on status. Three times in the *Acts of the Apostles* he reminds people he is a Roman citizen. That was a key bit of status, if you were a migrant, not a citizen, you had no vote, you could not make a will and the city would confiscate your property when you died, you could be tortured. If you were a *slave* you were even worse off, you were someone's property, you could, you would be used and abused, you would automatically be tortured if you came before the courts. It was assumed you would not tell the truth unless tortured. Status mattered a lot. Paul's letters are full of references to status, to Jew and Greek, male and female, to slave and free. All those ways of belonging or not belonging, all those ways of measuring who you are and how you fit in. That is the world that Paul belonged to, the conversation he had.

We do it a little differently. We still do migrants and residents, we do Mr Dean and Revd Canon. We do my place in the team, my Myers Briggs indicators, my colour profile. No wonder people tweak their Facebook status; we are all being told that these things matter.

So, we need to notice that, today, Paul gets hold of us by the shoulders and tells us there is one status we share. It is non-negotiable, fundamental and decisive, there is an identity that shapes us all Paul told us this morning, that we are sinners. All of us. Now, this is the sort of thing that you think Christians are bound to say. *You are sinners; we are sinners*. What does it actually mean?

There is a word Paul uses for sin, in Greek it is *harmatia*. It doesn't translate as *wicked* or *evil*; the word means *missing the mark*. You aim to throw an apple core into bin and you miss that is *harmatia*. You cannot do what you intend. That is what Paul is talking about, that's why we heard this morning

*I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do*

Ask around about sin and what you usually hear is that we are all basically good, but just prone to messing up now and again. Sin, we think, is doing bad things. Now and again we do something wrong. If only we could stop kicking the cat, we would be fine. A bit more effort, and we would all be happy. And that is a way of thinking that gets us into trouble. What happens is that we see sins and we name them - she was rude to me; he ate the last piece of pie. We judge and we blame and we are only interested in the bad actions. We condemn people for what we think they have done, we rarely, almost never stop to think about our prejudice, our anger, our hate. We see action, we never worry about attitude.

Paul tells us that sin is not a matter of doing wrong things; sin is a condition. He is convinced we share a condition. Sin is instinctive in us; we are wired for it. We take aim, we miss. In his language we have a *body of sin*, we might more easily say now that sin is bred in the bone; it is in our DNA. Put another way we share a common status and it is the most important thing about us. We live in sin. We choose badly, we worship the wrong things, we actively seek out things that will do us no good. And that is our shared status. We are the same, you and me.

We are much better at thinking about other people's sin than our own. He is a sinner, you are sinful, I am having a bad day. We think sin divides us, he is an adulterer, she is a thief. We think sin makes us different. It doesn't, sin makes us the same.

All of which of course is rather depressing. Paul gets himself thoroughly depressed in Romans Chapter 7

*Wretched man that I am!*

Sin is a burden, a real burden. But this is only the first thing Paul says (even if says it emphatically and often). But, if you only say this (and I am afraid some Christians do seem to say only this), you have missed the point. We live in the body of sin. But so did Christ. And that sinful body has been killed. We now live in Christ.

This pretty dense stuff I know, but it will help us if we can understand it. Paul is telling us things have changed. They have not changed a little. I am 59 I will be 60. They have changed fundamentally. I was in sin; I am in Christ. Paul tells us our status has changed. He talks about sin and grace. He says we are sinners and God has done us a favour, given us a gift. God hasn't made it a bit better, made it a bit easier, bene nice to us. God has changed our status. And that is why our lesson this morning ended

*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Years ago we took small children who could sing a bit. Now as they leave the choir you could say they are slightly better singers. That misses the point. Years ago we took small

children and we took a risk we put them in cassocks and called them a choir. In an instant, they became something they had not been before. We changed their status. What they had to do then was live up to that. They had to practice.

That is exactly what has happened to you and me. Christ took our lives and made them his. He made us into something else. Now we have to live up to that. We have to practice.

Why does that matter? Why have I spent ten or fifteen minutes (and it probably feels longer) explaining Romans 7? Because it is a point about status and our concern for status is doing us in. We are more divided than ever, more status conscious than ever. We are having, all over again, the old arguments about citizens and migrants. We are still arguing about Jew and Greek, male and female. Worse, we are more divided by wealth and poverty than we ever were. We are deeply divided and obsessed by status. Paul wants us to take another look. We have one status we share. We are sinners, wired for making wrong choices. We are the same. Then we have another status that is sheer gift. We are in Christ.

We are the same and we are blessed. We should be ashamed that we miss the truths that matter in order to argue about details. We pick over the symbols of status that divide us and ignore the truth that unites us.

We thank God today for the gift given to these children and to their shared commitment to living up to the calling. They have a lot to teach us.