

Sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> after Trinity. St John and St Stephen's Reading. 09.07.21. Romans 7:15-25a & Matthew 11:16-19; 25-end.

Who do you think you are? (In search of a truly Christian anthropology)

I expect a fair number of you might have watched the TV show *Who do you think you are?* In the show, various well-known people consult genealogy specialists to find out about their forbears, and by association, about themselves. The consistently interesting thing is the very close resemblance in motivation, character, actions, likes, dislikes and general life direction that often exists between the person and their past.

It's a good title too: *Who do you think you are?* The message seems to be that although we think we make free choices and pick our own destiny, there are other, powerful drivers at work which mean this is not the whole story. We're less individualistic than we think we are.

The bible contains many possible answers to the question, *who do you think you are?* Perhaps the psalmist expresses it best: 'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' (Psalm 8:4)

This morning we heard one of Paul's descriptions of the conflict within human beings. He uses his own experience as the prime example and describes his life of trying to follow the Lord as a struggle. He talks about a war raging inside him, and by extension, inside us.

I wonder how you reacted to the first reading and whether, like me, you might've found it difficult to take on board. How often do you feel 'captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members'? We tend to hear a lot about freedom and inner peace these days – a response, I suppose, to the crazy times we are living in. There's so much conflict in the news, and especially on social media, that we're perhaps more used to seeing the main conflict as 'out there' rather than 'in here'.

There's also been an understandable kick-back from harsh Protestant interpretations of the place of the body in Christianity, which had more to do with Platonism than Hebrew thought. We got tired of hearing how evil the body was and how only the spirit was pure, and needing to be free of baser materials.

It might make us uncomfortable, therefore, to read about this 'body of death' that Paul speaks of. He's noticing his inner conflict, the conflict he feels between the mind that wants to follow God, and the flesh that frequently sabotages that desire. Is this your experience?

When you hear that Romans passage, what do you feel? Paul begins by saying 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' In getting to grips with his own humanity, in finding out who he truly is, Paul admits: 'I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind.'

And the killer line: 'For I know that nothing good dwells within me...' It's very stark. It reminds me of the line from the Prayer Book, which I always found hard to say: 'and there is

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no health in us'. It sounds so uncompromising, so dualistic. Aren't we a mixture of impulses, and aren't we called to love our bodies and pay attention to their needs?

It's one of those pieces of scripture that I suspect has fallen out of fashion with 'progressive Christians', having been replaced by a number of inspirational sayings that sound kind of spiritual but would sit uncomfortably with St Paul (e.g. *be true to yourself; follow your dreams; etc.*)

This passage also sits uncomfortably with advice I often want to give to other women of a certain age who have been putting other people's needs before their own for so long, that they've lost track of who they are and don't know what things they need to refresh themselves – sometimes to the point of becoming unwell in some way. I want to say, 'love yourself, and practice self-care'.

At this point, it's probably helpful to remember that Paul uses two different words in Greek for 'body'. The word 'sarx', used in this context, suggests our fallen state, our tendency to 'miss the mark'; whereas 'soma' refers simply to the physical body. So, yes, it is important to take care of our bodies and treat them as precious. At the same time, we can't afford to lose sight of the fact that as flawed humans we often struggle to follow up our best inclinations with actual actions. This is the conflict Paul is describing.

The second reading, from Matthew, oddly enough, didn't give me so much pause for thought. Instead, as I leafed through the news stories of the week, I could see exactly how Jesus here has captured the human condition. Like Paul, Jesus doesn't pull any punches, pointing out the hypocrisy of the crowd around him that criticised both John the Baptist, who was an aesthete, and the Son of Man, who 'came eating and drinking'. The crowd grumbled about both states, proving that in public life you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

The crowd here are likened to spoiled infants: they wanted the Messiah to be whatever they felt in that moment. This has been a week where the popularity of the Prime Minister took a nosedive amongst Conservative supporters. Having been a nice steady change from showman Boris, he's now accused of managerialism and lack of charisma.

They wanted someone with charisma, then complained about it. They wanted someone who played it by the book, then complained about it...' 'We played the flute ... and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn'. It's an uncomfortable reminder that humans are fickle creatures who bend with the wind of circumstance.

As we search for a truly Christian understanding of humanity, the gospel is a timely reminder that we cannot please all of the people all of the time, and trying to do so is not only pointless, it often reveals some sort of unhealthy inner drive that we might not be aware of.

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Why are we so desperately seeking approval and popularity? God thinks you're wonderful already. To be popular with every single person you interact with may leave you feeling pretty exhausted. So if you're someone who's constantly run off their feet responding to others' agendas, I wonder if this brusque message from Jesus could be good news?

At the same time as it's perhaps become unfashionable to harp on about our tendency towards sin, there's a parallel reassessment going on by those who've seen the unintended effects of us having created ever more complex IT systems – so called artificial intelligence, or AI.

As I pondered this, I happened to watch *The Social Dilemma*, a Netflix documentary/drama about the dark side of the internet, and the rise of what some have termed 'surveillance capitalism'. The programme makers, most of whom were former Big Tech senior employees, had all begun to get uneasy about the unregulated nature of the tech that increasingly influences our lives. It's a very hard-hitting film. Some of the contributors were so clearly worried about appearing on film that one said he'd spent 8 months consulting lawyers.

The film depicts in dramatic form the giant data base that exists on all of us who use the internet – the sum of all of our clicks, all of our likes, all of our reactions to posts; in short, all of our internet activity.

The increasingly sophisticated IT systems of Google and Facebook know us better each day. They know where we live, what we like, what our spending habits are, what our values are and who we're likely to vote for. They know exactly which ads to place onto our feeds and they know what the percentage likelihood is of us clicking on one, and how that click might lead to another click and another, and eventually not just get us addicted to our devices, but dramatically affect the way we think.

Another charge against the tech giants, which was much more disturbing, was the global effect of 'fake news'. The rumoured Russian interference in the US election of 2016 was cited as a direct indication of this worrying erosion of democracy. The rise of populism has also coincided with newsfeeds that are directly tailored to us so that we are more and more likely to demonise the opposition and feel convinced in our own rightness.

*Make America Great Again; Take Back Control; Get Brexit Done; Stop the Boats.* All slogans designed to grab our attention, appeal to humanity's baser instincts and make very complex things seem simple. Even the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and the persecution of the Rohingya people was directly linked to the incitement to violence that various skewed news pieces had achieved via social media.

But at the heart of the programme was this insight: 'it's not about the technology being the existential threat, it's the technology's ability to bring out the worst in society being the existential threat.' It would seem, from this programme at least, that finally we are waking up to the darker side of our creativeness.

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And if we feel that we're largely inured against the worst of social media, at least think about the mental health of the young people we know. Rates of anxiety, depression and even suicide are going up in direct proportion to the amount of time young people spend on their phones, worrying about how they come across to others. This is a particular minefield for young girls.

Jesus' words about the 'wise and intelligent' being unaware, and having what is really important hidden from them, seemed so pertinent while I was watching *The Social Dilemma*. It was (if one was needed) a difficult reminder that we've underestimated the inevitable spiral downwards that happens when we invent something as powerful as the internet, despite its potential for great good. A quotation from Sophocles begins the film: 'Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.'

So, who do we think we are? Scripture is nothing if not realistic. We are beings that have to face our inner conflict. Not because we're depraved and fear God's response, but because following Jesus, if it was hard for Paul, will certainly not be a walk in the park for us.

And if it does feel like a slog, we have the promise of Jesus that a right awareness of who we truly are in Christ, an accurate and clear-eyed Christian anthropology, will feel easy and not hard; gentle and not harsh.

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.