

PODCAST – 19<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2020 (Based on Romans 8:12-25)

Today's passage from the letter to the Romans speaks to us about how we live – or how we could, or maybe even should, live - if our lives are founded on God.

In my days as a Boys' Brigade leader, we took our company to an annual gathering based just outside of Hemel Hempstead (Oh those strange roundabouts! If you've been there, you'll know what I mean...roundabouts, within roundabouts – they are quite disconcerting!). Anyway, back to my story – the BB headquarters was a beautiful old house called Feldon Lodge (and still is, I note from googling it!) up on the hill outside of Hemel and had wonderful grounds in which we camped, attended worship sessions, stayed up late in the gym area watching naff films and ate lots of fried-egg baps made in the catering van (Nora's Nosh, I think it was called) – healthy living at its best! It was a great time to be away with the young people and a boost to their young lives and developing faith. The event was called 'Firm Foundations' and that's what it sought to offer the young people and the leaders if we were lucky enough to be able to go. Somewhere I have a woolly hat with 'FIRM FOUNDATIONS' printed in red on it – perhaps I'll find it when I move house?

Whether we 'wear' our faith like a woolly hat, or a cross around our necks, or a pin badge on our lapel – what we should all certainly strive to do – is to live it out as fully as we can, not for the sake of 'showing-off', or trying to pretend that we think we're better than someone else but just because we have this great gift that helps us day by day and because we have found it to be so good –that we would wish for others to share in it too.

So, having said all that, what does Paul suggest in this passage from his letter to the church in Rome, are some of the good things of our life lived with God as our 'Firm Foundation'?

Well, as you might expect from me as a preacher, I found quite a few things in this short passage alone – let's take a quick look at them and then think about how we help ourselves, and others, embrace them more fully.

The first thing that stands out to me is in verses 12-13, where the NRSV (which we heard Paul Missin read from for us today) speaks of us not being debtors to the flesh but living by the Spirit. Through our faith in God, because of all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus, we are set free (see the earlier verses of Chapter 8 where Paul, that is St Paul, speaks about this in a bit more detail). We are no longer bound by, weighed down with, all the faults and failings of our very human nature but released to truly live our fullest lives in the power of God's Holy Spirit living in us. Isn't that quite amazing? That God would give us such a gift – God's very presence offered to and dwelling in us? That certainly should lighten our load because we know that we're never, ever alone – God is always with us – helping, sustaining, guiding, encouraging us onwards and upwards into a fuller experience of life, life well lived, life in all its fullness (as Jesus in the gospel of John speaks Chp 10:10).

This leads us to verse 14 and what stands out for me as the key sentiment of this section of Paul's letter – that we are led by the Spirit to be CHILDREN OF GOD. I've put that in capital letters in my notes as I think that phrase needs to stand out (perhaps it should be another 'hat' message – CHILD OF GOD! Perhaps I will develop a sideline in natty hats with Christian messages.....no, maybe not! I'm sure someone already done that!) But to be named as a Child of God, to live our days as God's beloved children – this speaks of closeness, love, support, protection, provision and so many other

things that a loving parent would want to offer their offspring. This is another amazing gift of God, because it's all in God's gracious self-giving that we receive this name, that we are invited into this kind of special relationship.

I think this ought to make a huge difference to how we live....I am a child of God; you are a child of God! Perhaps we all ought to print that out and put it somewhere that we can see at the start of every new day and then seek to live (really live!) in its truth and joy and peace.

Verse 15 tells us that our foundational existence in God, enables us to live free from fear and in verse 21 this 'freedom' idea is again mentioned – as being set free from our 'bondage to decay'. I don't know how helpful you find these words; freedom is certainly a good one but 'bondage to decay' might grate a little perhaps? In the Revised English Bible it renders vs. 21 differently saying that we are: 'freed from the shackles of mortality to enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God'. That sits a bit better with me – freed up from fear (vs 15) and freed up from the limitations of our human physical existence (vs 21), to a kind of living that is joyfully, exuberantly, trustingly lived in God's strength and with God's closeness and love all around – each and every moment a real blessing and a gift of grace. How wonderful life would be, if we could live like that a little more.

We then read, in verse 17, that we are to live as joint heirs with Christ – fancy that!?! Our status as God's children lifts us to share in all that Jesus had as God's first-begotten child. We can therefore quite openly and honestly call Jesus our brother (or sibling, if you prefer) and that might be a great comfort if we want to connect with God on very human terms – a God who lived life like us; walked this earth, ate, drank and slept like us; had good days and bad days; a God who knows what it's like (and what we're like) and still offers us love. Sharing that 'inheritance' as God's children with Jesus, may mean that sufferings come our way because of our faith and others' rejection of it, or lack of understanding of what it offers us and might offer them too; but as we share in those challenges, we also get to share in all the blessings that come too and they will always far outweigh the negative stuff!

And because of all that, verses 24-25 tell us, that we live in hope. By hope we were saved and by hope we live – not because we can see everything right in front of us right now but because we have known God to be true in the past, we hold onto that promise and live as people who hope for better things to come. How we need that right now...hope of better things to come: life beyond lockdown; freedom to be able to worship together, in person, again; to be able to share a hug with, or hold the hand of someone not in our social 'bubble'; to go out for a meal, or a walk, or a trip to the shops without masks or anti-bacterial hand gel or fear.

Living as 'Children of God' is a wonderful gift and a great help, especially in these days. So how do we embrace that more fully? How might we offer that idea to others who don't read our bible and have never heard this passage from Paul's letter?

Well, reflecting on this has put me in mind of Jesus' parable of the 'Prodigal Son' (Luke 15:11-32 – have a read if you haven't read it before or recently). The story of the gracious, heart-felt, joyous, embracing welcome of the loving, waiting parent, to their contrite, broken and hopeless child – returning home after making a complete mess of their life and expecting nothing other than some small amount of mercy and a chance to serve in the home that was once theirs.

The home-coming child can do nothing for themselves anymore and then, stunningly, realises they don't have to, it's all there waiting for them in the place that is still their home and in their overjoyed parent that welcomes them back with open arms.

Some of you may be familiar with Rembrandt's painting called 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' that hangs in the Hermitage in St Petersburg and also of the book of the same name written by Henri Nouwen following his encounter with this work. It's really worth a look, if you haven't read it; I think it stays with me as 'The book I'd like everyone to read', as it says so much that is true about our life with God and God's generous love to us.

Perhaps the parable, the painting and the book are ways into a deeper understanding of this life live as 'Children of God' – for us and for others too. We could perhaps 'sign post' one of these to someone else that we think needs to learn a little more about the God who yearns for them to accept their place as a Child of God too? Or maybe, probably, we just need to start with ourselves – learning to live our lives that little bit more fully, led by God's Spirit, freed up from our human frailty and fear, relishing the blessings we have to help us with the challenges we face and living always in hope – that, with God, better things will and do come and, at the end of this life, there's a whole new, eternal one, waiting for us to explore!

May the peace of God, the love of Christ and the light of the Spirit guard, guide and keep you – always! Amen.