

Sermon 2023 09 17 Text

Today I would like to take some words from our Epistle reading and hold them in tension with our Collect prayer.

Romans 14.7-9

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.

⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Prayer of the Day

O God,
you call your Church to witness.
that in Christ we are reconciled to you:
help us so to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may turn to you.

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That extract from the Letter to the Roman forms part of the Order of Service for Funerals.

This can be both appropriate and later distracting.

It is appropriate because in the midst of our grief we are reminded that in Christ, those who live in this life, and those who have passed from this life, continue to form an active community of the people of God.

It is used to emphasise that both those living in this life and those who have been taken up into a wholeness of life with God continue to be one unified people.

It is distracting because we generally stop at the point of focus of unity. It gives us a level of contentment and peace to know that the one who has gone is still held with us in the gentle hand of God.

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Our Collect today calls us back into sharp focus, to reflect on those who live in this part of God's Kingdom.

So, I want to call us back to that part of the reading set in the now.

If we live, we live to the Lord,
If we live, we are the Lord's.
For to this end Christ died and lived again.

In this part of God's Kingdom, we form a community that lives for Christ. We are called to witness, to reconcile and to proclaim love so that all may turn to Christ.

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And there is a clear emphasis, that God's Kingdom is about community, not individuality. In community we live for each other. If one has joy, then we must work to ensure that all have joy. If one is in pain, then we must work to ensure that all are free from pain. If one does not experience love, then we must work to ensure that all are able to experience love. If one does not experience the love of God, then we must work to ensure that all are able to experience that love of God.

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Our treatment of the Jewish people is a good example of our failure to ensure the love of God in action.

The history of the relationship between the Jewish people and the rest of humanity is one of sadness instead of joy, pain instead of freedom from pain, and hatred instead of love.

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These people of first creation fell and were excluded from the Garden of Eden. Our mortality is too often seen in the fall of Adam. A Jewish person sinned therefore all are mortal because of Adam's sin. Death entered humanity through the actions of a Jew.

The Jewish people were held in slavery in Egypt. In order to free them, as we read last week, God killed the first born of all in Egypt except those whose doorposts were painted with blood. Thousands died so that the people of Israel could escape to wander through the desert to their promised land.

The Jews came to their promised land and settled. From then on, they were subject to invasion, persecution, and slavery.

Jesus was born in the reign of Herod, puppet king under Roman masters. And the Roman puppet killed hundreds of first-born children in the hope of eradicating this threatening, new-born, king of the Jews.

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Jesus is killed to redeem us from the mortality incorporated into us by a Jewish people who refused to follow the instructions of God. And right up until our 1978 prayer book, our service for Good Friday contained a prayer for the destruction of the Jewish people because they demanded the death of our Christ.

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Many Jewish people went to Rome, where they became scapegoats for a failing Roman Empire and they fled before those who blamed them and would nail them to posts, cover them in oil and ignite them to light a road at night or, perhaps more charitably feed them to lions for entertainment in the Colosseum.

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Again, they fled -- this time to Spain. Here their exceptional business skills saw them praised and honoured until they accumulated too much wealth and too much power. Again, they became a target and were stripped of their wealth, killed, or driven from the land.

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Hitler saw them as vermin – a people to be arrested, have their wealth taken from them, and sent to the concentration camps. Here millions were killed in the gas chambers. Even in death there was persecution. The bodies of many were boiled down, rendered, and made into soap.

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At the end of WWII, someone drew a line on a map and gave the land inside the lines for a Jewish homeland. And they have

continued to be at war ever since with people displaced by those arbitrary lines.

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Much of the history of humanity is the displacing of others so that we may build the sort of world we want.

The Celts invaded the Picts. The Romans invaded the Celts. The Vikings invaded the Roman Celts and became the Anglo-Saxons, and the Normans invaded the Anglo Saxons.

Centuries later the British invaded China, India, Africa, the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. The Dutch, the French, the Spanish, the Germans, and the Portuguese did much the same thing.

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In the Jewish Diaspora there was a proliferation of hatred, violence, and dispossession.

In the search for gold, glory and God by the Colonising powers of the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries there was a proliferation of hatred, violence, and dispossession.

In WWI and WWII and the actions which preceded and succeeded them there was a proliferation of hatred, violence, and dispossession.

Even today in South America, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia and in Western Europe there is a proliferation of hatred, violence and dispossession.

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For all our technological and scientific achievements we have never achieved peace in the collective hearts of humanity.

How well do we really take to heart those words from the Letter to the Romans?

If we live, we live to the Lord,
If we live, we are the Lord's.
For to this end Christ died and lived again.

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Against the great barrage of history our lives, even our national life is only able to make small steps.

But in the words of Neil Armstrong as he stood on the Moon on the 20th of July 1969, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

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I wonder if somewhere, somehow, sometime soon there might be an opportunity for us as a people to stand against hatred, violence, and dispossession.

I wonder if our lives might demonstrate that we are the Lord's, that we live to the Lord – and so that we might act as people for whom Christ died and lived again?

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