

As I said last Sunday we are starting a new teaching series this week. Now we're going to start by looking at the life of Moses but we're going to use Moses' life as a springboard to look at some of Paul's teaching in the letter to the Romans, teaching about freedom and responsibility; so we're going to take aspects and parts of Moses' life and look at how Paul's teaching can connect with those aspects of Moses' life. And the series is all about freedom and responsibility. And I wanted to pick up on this idea because at the moment our freedom is curtailed, we can't do the things that we'd like to be doing. But I suppose the question that we could ask is: What does true freedom mean? Is true freedom to be able to go out and go anywhere we want, and to see anyone we want, and, you know, be out there doing whatever? Or is true freedom the freedom that we can know internally. The freedom to be loved and to love others. What is true freedom? So that's the sort of question I'd like to explore over these next few weeks as we look at the life of Moses and then Paul's teaching that connects with the life of Moses.

So, let's just for a moment or two look at some context for Moses' life. The last 13 chapters of Genesis mainly tell the amazing story of Joseph. You'll remember that Joseph started out as a spoilt daddy's boy, a dreamer, and he aggravated his brother's so much that they sold him into slavery, but as you may know through a complicated series of events Joseph became a powerful leader in Egypt and saved his family, and the whole Egyptian nation, from starvation. The book of Exodus picks up the history of the Israelites some 200 years later after these events of Joseph's life. In chapter 1 of Exodus we have a description of how a new Egyptian Pharaoh sees the Israelites not as the way that his nation was blessed and saved from starvation, but rather sees the Israelites as a threat, and chooses to force them into brutal slave labour and even tried to reduce their numbers by having their baby boys killed at birth. It must have seen to the Israelites as though God had abandoned them or forgotten them, but as the end of Exodus chapter 2 says, well let's look at what Exodus chapter 2 says in verses 23 to 25:

[reading: Exodus 2:23-25]

Those words remind us that God hears the cries of the oppressed and those who are suffering, and God heard their cries. You see this is for me where the passage from Romans chapter 5 verses 1 to 11, that we're going to read in a moment or two, that's where that passage from Romans connects with the lives of the Israelites; because it was whilst they were in the Egyptian culture of their day worthless slaves, that God acted at just the right time to free them. So I'm going to read that passage from Romans now and if you're following the reading it is Romans chapter 5 verses 1 to 11, and in my Bible these verses are entitled "Peace and joy".

[reading: Romans 5:1-11]

Praise God. So, that passage from Romans.

You see I think God is all about relationship because God's very nature is relationship with the God-self. In Genesis 1:26, we read that God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." And in various other parts of the Old Testament we find hints of this communal 3-in-1 nature of God. And of course Jesus fleshed out this idea much more in the New Testament when he spoke

of himself and his connection to the father: "I and the father are one," and then spoke of the Holy Spirit: "I must go so the Holy Spirit can come." So Jesus fleshed out for use this idea of the community that is the Godhead. So it's in keeping with God's nature that God would want to be in relationship with us. And the first few words of this passage start by saying: "Since we have been justified..." And one of the ways we can define this word "Justified" is "to be put in right relationship with someone; to put in right relationship with someone." I want to reflect for a few moments on what Paul says here are some of the characteristics or the marks of a right relationship with God.

Firstly, I think that such a relationship is marked by Faith. Now Faith is one of those words that we use so much that if we're not careful we can lose a clear understanding of what we mean by that word. Faith for me is not first and foremost a matter of what we believe in our minds or in our heads, because it's quite possible to separate that belief off from how we live in real life. I think Faith is more about trust we can define as "confidence and certainty in the reliability of someone or something." I would say that real Faith, or real trust, must have an element of risk to it. Many years ago when Sandra was a teenager she attended an international Christian youth event in the United States and to mark the event every attendee was given a Good News Bible. Now the Bible she was given is very much like any other, quite a small Bible but it contains some beautiful simple line drawings which illustrate certain Bible verses. Now I'd like to show you a picture from Hebrews. So the picture here is one of a tiny figure standing at the bottom of a rocky craggy sort of rock face. This tiny figure is staring up that rock face, and the figure is standing in amongst brambles and rocks, and weeds...jagged rocks; all sorts of unpleasantness, he is really in an unpleasant place. At the top of the rock face, over the top beyond the rock face you have a representation here of a beautiful tranquil oasis with lush vegetation, with exotic animals (you probably can't see them but lions and lambs, a lion and lamb together there, and other creatures) and a little representation of a lake, and even at the back there is some sort of dwelling which is a representation of shelter and refuge, and the Bible verse that is there is from Hebrews 11:1; and the Bible verse says "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." You see, the fact is that if we are already able to see and take hold of what we hope for then by definition we would not need Faith. God calls us to take a risk by trusting what he promises we will one day see fulfilled.

Secondly, a right relationship with God is marked by Grace, marked by Grace. I reckon that Grace is one of those concepts that is so simple and yet is so difficult to fully take on board. Most of us can happily and gratefully accept what Paul says in verse 8 of this passage: "while we were still Sinners Christ died for us." He still loves us even though we screwed up. However, don't we still catch ourselves looking at other people and making judgements about them? Usually, we do it about different people to us whether it's asylum seekers, people who beg for money on the streets, gay people or Muslims, or whoever else it is that we want to be able to say, "they're different to us" and actually we use them in their difference to make ourselves feel better and feel, perhaps, superior. In fact, in these days it could be those people who rifle through the loose vegetable crates in the supermarket or those people who will not respect social distancing rules. But my point is Grace means that God has stopped counting our sins and measuring how good or bad we are, *but* we have got to stop counting and measuring other people as well. That's what Grace means. God looks at us and loves us despite our sins, despite our mistakes. But God says we need to do it as well: stop judging, stop counting, stop measuring.

Thirdly, a right relationship with God is marked by a collective view, and to be honest for years I missed this extremely obvious point. In this passage, how many times does Paul use the words “I”, “me” and “my”? The answer is none! How many times does he refer to “we”, “us” and “our”? Well I counted 24 times just in this short passage, 24 times. In Western Christianity for centuries we have increasingly understood our spiritual condition in individualistic terms; in other words, it's all about dealing with my *own* sins so that God will give *me* personal Salvation, so that I will not suffer the individual judgement that I deserve. But the Biblical writers see the human condition and God's response to it as much more corporate and collective; in other words we as human beings corporately bear both the weight of glory and the burden of Sin. If we can take on board this collective understanding that we are in this together, then I believe will help us to overcome two of the main spiritual cul-de-sacs that we so easily go down, that is either spiritual arrogance, which might say, “what a wonderful glorious godly person I am, isn't God lucky to have me!”; alternatively, there is the sense of spiritual and worthiness that so many people suffer with and that often plays in our minds as: “how could God love someone who is as sinful as I am? Why would God ever want and love me?” Now this collective understanding that I believe can release from those two spiritual cul-de-sacs, that collective understanding does not let us off the hook because we still know that we're responsible for a small piece of the sinfulness of humanity, but that we also carry a small part of the glory of God's image and likeness within ourselves. But it means we don't carry that full burden of all of this sin, but also that burden of the glory that can cause us to feel arrogant.

So, going back to the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, how did God breakthrough to them? Well he used their desperate circumstances to make them aware that they could not overcome on their own, and he used those circumstances to teach them to worship and trust him even in the midst of their oppression. And he did all of this so that they would develop spiritual muscles, as it were, or as Paul puts it in verse 3 of our passage from Romans, “if we can learn to rejoice in our sufferings then God will use them to produce perseverance, character and hope. I think as a world we are currently going through a form of suffering: our freedom to do what we want is at the moment severely restricted and this virus remind us every day that we are not in control. So in this time of fear, anxiety and restricted living I invite you to join me in asking God to help us to rejoice in our sufferings. Now I don't mean that we should rejoice because our sufferings but rather to learn to give thanks despite them, recognising that God's love and God's grace towards us and all humanity has not changed. Amen.