

Romans 5:1-8 Sermon for 9.15am and 11am – Growing faith, from death to life

The problem with preaching from Romans, for me personally at least, is the tendency to take what is gold and dissect it, analyse it and strip it down to its various components – which is fine if you want to do some sort of technical theology lecture, or trying to treat someone's chronic sleep disorder. No-one would be keen to rob a vault of solid metal, atomic number 79 from group 11 of the period table with a melting point of 1337Kelvin, a density of 19.3g/cm³ and a covalent radius of 136pm; but there are tons of people who have tried to rob bank vaults filled with cool, shimmering gold, sparkling in the moonlight as it is transferred into lorries waiting outside the vault. So today we'll try not to do reduce the passage to its constituent parts.

However, the reason why it is so easily done is that Romans is just so densely packed with truth and so it can feel a bit like the writer, Paul, is basically flying down a motorway past wonders of the world on both sides but without paying anything other than passing attention to them. In today's passage, massive theological terms and concepts just come and go, as if they were just normal which they most definitely are not. And so it is really really difficult to get a handle on what to talk about, which is why it would be easier for me just to give you a walking tour of theological terms, and therefore do that dissecting and desiccating thing that I mentioned a moment ago. All these terms are true, all exciting in their own way, but it would be like watching Strictly frame by frame, analysing the body positions at each moment rather than enjoying the free-flowing, whirling shapes of the dance. So, today we're going to try to look at the dance Paul is doing, not the landmarks he passes as such.

So if we get to the end of today, and you feel short-changed in theological terms, then grab me afterwards and we can happily knock some around together. If, however, you get to the end of the sermon and the passage has still managed to lost its shimmer, its glitz and glam; if the passage hasn't sparkled out then I've clearly failed. The letter to the Romans in the bible has the power to change lives completely. It brings the whole of God's work into contact with the whole of human history; past, present and future. There is no-one excluded from its reach. It's at the same time, a great leveller - denying old ethnic and social barriers; but at the same time it is the great elevator – raising us all up to the possibility of peace with God and blessings that this entails. Which is neatly, where we start.

Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

So, the lights have gone low, the spotlight has fired up and the dance has begun. A ballerina begins to move as the music swirls between four major chords – peace, grace, hope and glory. And at each chord, the music waits, just long enough for us to think. The ballerina poses hesitatingly, just considering for a moment how each chord changes the dance as it goes on.

Chord one sounds gently. Somehow the ballerina seems relieved. We have peace with God. This is a lingering chord, giving the audience the chance to just begin to consider all the different notes in the chord – what does peace with God mean, is it necessary, peace from what – what non-peace was there before?

But the music cannot wait forever; the ballerina doesn't quite pause before moving on with a flurry of explanatory notes. Peace with God if you like, forms a musical theme for the next bar, but the melody plays on and the dancer twirls into a tall standing position – a position of receiving grace. As the ballerina reaches high, the melody cascades from high notes as if to touch her and shower her with notes. She is in a privileged position. She receives these notes as we all hold our breath at the beauty of what has happened. From the hesitatingly beautiful chord of peace with God, we have a cascading, glittering flow of grace, received simply by standing and reaching.

But this is also not the end of the dance. The music moves, the ballerina's hands float to her sides and she steps forward, perhaps tentatively, perhaps confidently, but certainly she steps forward as the music rises again and becomes louder and booming, increasing to a third major chord. A hopeful chord. One which anticipates the rest of the dance. It is as though the whole dance has led up to this moment where peace with God with a shower of grace could only lead here – to this teetering, anticipating, and yearning moment – a moment with a step forward into hope. But at the same time, the chord is hollow and unfinished and though the ballerina is stepping out and anticipating, this chord of hope simply anticipates the final chord. There is a breathless pause. She readies herself. Perhaps there is a momentary panic in the audience that the final chord may not be coming. It seems to take longer than it should, and yet, this also is part of the dance; allowing us to become transfixed by what is to come...

Finally, the fourth chord, the chord of glory, sounds. The sound is overwhelming. It reverberates throughout everyone present and it seems like it has in fact been there all through the music and in fact was playing even while we were filing into the auditorium. It is a long note, which never seems to die away, never fades, but somehow simply becomes a part of each of us. As for the ballerina, we expect a flourish, a tumble or a spectacular jump; but it is as if she is just as transfixed as we are. She stands for a moment, basking in it, letting it fill her. The vibration plays with her hair as she closes her eyes. The spotlights seem burning and yet, they are no longer pointing at the ballerina. They have moved without us realising it and suddenly we realise there is another figure on the stage. This figure we realise has been there all along, in the shadows on the stage right in front of our eyes. In fact, now we think about it, perhaps that figure was already dancing when we came in.

How could we have failed to notice? This second figure had been there all along. It was him who told the orchestra to strike up and it was him who danced through the introduction to the first chord, the peace of God. Somehow, we hadn't noticed, but now it seems only right and proper that there was an introduction before this first chord sounded, before our star ballerina began to move. Something had to happen to bring this chord into play or else it would have seemed utterly stark, wrong and unjustified. The first chord, the peace with God, just couldn't have played without this second dancer. Without him, the show could not have started and without him, the ballerina's movements would have been simply hollow wishful thinking.

And so we cast our memories backwards to what was happening when we came in to the theatre this evening. As we were reading our programs and chatting, waiting for the show to start, wasn't there movement on the stage? Hadn't the orchestra been playing? We'd assumed it was warming up to the main act. We'd assumed it was a sound check or a lighting test. But it seems now that it was really the prelude to the first chord. The figure that had danced in the shadows while we ignored him is now the one in the spotlight. This figure, who had endured our apathy, and our derision because he wasn't dressed like a top dancer, is now bathed in glorious light.

We remember that this figure had, before the show, become hopelessly tangled in the set. He had been motionless for what seemed like ages, his arms stretched out wide, almost pleading as the

spiralling tendrils of wires, pulleys and props reaching up from the ground held him fast. We'd all assumed this was a mistake. We'd chuckled briefly assuming his ineptitude and his failure as we went back to our conversations. But, miraculously, he had begun to dance again and somehow this seemingly disastrous episode has enabled the rest of the show. Somehow the miraculous escape from the winding bonds of theatrical dross set the stage for the ballerina who could not have danced without it.

This figure is now the figure accepting our spontaneous applause. And so, we suddenly realise that the real dancer was not the ballerina we watched so carefully, but the figure who had already performed before she started. The figure who pre-performed all her moves. The figure who we now realise actually led her in the dance. Led her to the chord of peace with God. We realise that somehow he conducted the cascading of the second graceful chord with its seeming stream of notes from heaven. We realise that it was only because this figure had stepped forward first that the dancer could follow, stepping into the third chord of hope. All this we hadn't noticed, but now we see truly and clearly for the first time, as the fourth glorious chord sounds within and all around us. We see truly the real dance, the real star dancer. We appreciate the cost he must have borne of being ignored, distained and mocked before, as we realise the whole truth of the dance.

And as we stand to applause, this, now-heroic figure, crosses the stage and tenderly takes the hand of the ballerina, raises her up from her kneeling on the floor and embraces her as her friend, her partner and her soulmate. She shares in his glory. We shout encore, encore. We want to see it all again, with fresh eyes full of tears at the beauty we are witnessing. But it cannot be played again. We realise the music is still playing. The dance isn't even over! However, it is as if all four chords are playing at the same time. Peace, grace, hope and glory all harmonising and all laid ready for us to enjoy. It is as if there is no longer a progression in the music, but instead simply chords which reverberate and fill us; none of them in competition, but all of them essential to the music.

We flock to the stage. We cannot help ourselves. We embrace our hero, who seems to burn bright in the spotlight. We embrace each other, all our old enmities and petty squabbles gone. We all bask in the deep music and the light of glory for what seems like a moment, and for what seems like forever at the same time.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

I wonder where you are today. Are you in your seat, unable to see the second figure, the figure of Jesus? Would you like to see him? Are you trying to ignore him and concentrate on the ballerina? Perhaps feel like you went to the dancefloor years ago, but have stopped feeling the music in the same way or perhaps the heroic figure seems lost in the crowd. Maybe you'd love to come to the dancefloor and meet the figure but you aren't sure how. Maybe you're on the floor but there are people you don't wish to embrace there as well or you are worried about others whom you love who are still in their seats. Maybe, like me, you want so much to be able to find the words to explain how amazing it is to be a Christian, but it always just seems to come out in a dry and boring fashion.

Let's all take a moment of quiet to reflect, and if necessary to pray. If praying is new to you and you aren't sure what to do, then just like the ballerina, relax and be led by Jesus. God isn't looking for a perfect prayer, just a genuine one. Let's pray.