

Homily – Sunday 13th January 2019 – 6 pm

I just love it when Paul gets on a roll, as he seems to have in this evening's reading. It feels as though he is engaged in a conversation with himself, taking both sides of the argument. And perhaps what touches me the most is how much he cares. Whether or not I am in agreement with what he is saying, I always admire Paul's passion and commitment. This really matters to him.

The challenge he's wrestling with this evening is what it means that we are justified by faith. Throughout the previous chapter of this letter to the Romans, Paul has been at pains to point out that we are dependent on God's grace. There is nothing that we can do to prove ourselves to God; rather it is through God's grace that our sins are forgiven.

The problem for Paul is that, in his excitement to explain the extent of God's grace, he finds himself saying that it doesn't matter how much sin there is because there is always more grace – that is the nature of God. And then it's almost as though he can hear the naughty child in the corner of the classroom rubbing their hands in glee and saying: "Excellent. So if there will always be *more* grace, surely that means that we should just sin and sin and sin, to guarantee the outflowing of grace."

And it is at this point that this evening's reading commences, with one of Paul's wonderful "By no means!" statements. By no means should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound.

The thing is, faith presents us with very real challenges. It is today that we remember the baptism of Christ, and in doing so perhaps recall our own baptismal vows. That image of Jesus's baptism is beautiful, with the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and declaring God's pleasure. And for some of us, baptism may have marked a turning point in our lives.

But, like it or not, it will not have transformed us from being anything other than human. Those of us who seek to follow Christ cannot claim to be free from sin. There's no doubt about it, we make mistakes. And inevitably that can raise questions. What's the point of claiming to be a Christian if you fail as often as the next person? Paul argues that what our faith makes possible is a transformation in the consequences of those failings – faith in Christ means we're no longer *defined* by our mistakes.

And perhaps that's an interesting place to start in the New Year. To allow ourselves a little bit of time to think about those aspects of our faith which nourish us. Evensong is always a time I find myself thinking about this because there is something about beautiful music which inspires me and draws me out of myself. I wonder what helps you? Friendships and community? Peace and quiet? Learning and discovery? Time spent in prayer?

It can be easy to feel discouraged in a world that appears to recognise less and less the significance of faith, but there is so much to give us hope. We don't come to church because we think we're perfect, but often because we recognise that we're not. Just as – to quote CS Lewis – we don't pray because it changes God, but because it changes us.

While I sometimes struggle with the twists and turns of St. Paul's reasoning, I admire his desire to know the basis of his faith and to reach out to others. His life was transformed by knowing God's love, and I hope and pray that ours are, too. Reaching out in love is something we all do differently –

because God made each one of us differently. Since God's love and grace is for everyone, let's keep on finding ways to recognise it in our own lives, and to share it in our own unique ways. Amen.