

SERMON FOR TRINITY 3 | 2 July 2017 at 8am

It is a fact that we are one of the most ‘watched’ nations on earth. There are more speed cameras and more security devices here than in any other country in the world.

I wonder what that does to us? Have we now arrived at the age of George Orwell’s 1984 where ‘Big Brother’ sees everything that we do (I won’t even bother with the current TV reality show where people take part in such a world voluntarily), and where every action is watched? And you will remember in the book how Winston discovered that there was a small corner in one of his rooms which, by chance, was out of reach of the camera – and how precious he found it to have even a tiny space where he wasn’t being scrutinised by someone else.

When we drive today, we know that there are cameras which effectively force us to keep to the speed limit – not just the 20mph in Islington but the 70mph on the motorways. But what about those areas where the long lens of a video camera doesn’t reach – out in the more remote areas where we know we can put our foot down if we want to.

If you are like me, we breathe a bit of a sigh of relief – not because we necessarily want to go too fast, but just because we know we are free to do what we like.

In today’s second reading we have a really difficult passage from Romans chapter 6 where Paul is wrestling with the same problem. If we are free to do what we like, will doing the wrong thing be our natural choice?

And his answer is ‘yes’! Our natural instinct as human beings, he says, is to say ‘What the hell’ and to do what comes naturally. The only thing that stops us is ‘the Law’ – and for us in the UK, the security camera which enforces it. And at least a bit of us resents the fact that we are watched, penned in by ‘the long arm of the law’... although we sometimes are grateful for those cameras if it catches someone else – robbing a house or stabbing someone in the street.

But St Paul wants to take us in a different direction. To keep the reading short enough, we don't have the first part of Chapter 6 which is a shame because it makes sense of the rest. At the start of the chapter Paul asks the question: what happens to our potential to do the wrong thing when we die? And of course the answer is: we can't sin after we die, it's too late. When we die those choices aren't available to us anymore.

He then goes on to say: so if that is true, what happened after Jesus died? By dying on the Cross, he too was freed from sin and death and that is celebrated in his Resurrection. What is Easter? The triumph of Jesus who beat death by rising to new life.

OK, says Paul: then if sin and death have been beaten by Jesus – what that does mean for us? It means that, when we were baptized we too share in Jesus' victory. The power of the Resurrection is not confined to Jesus: at our baptism it is shared with us and we are introduced – now, while we are still living – to a new mode of life. Sin, the desire to do what isn't right, doesn't have the last word in our lives because we are part of a new way of living where Jesus has blasted a new path for us to follow. In St Paul's words, from our baptism onwards, we *are dead to sin; sin has no more dominion over us.....*

O yes! you say. But I really hadn't noticed the difference! In what way does a baptism stop me from being just as tempted to sin as I ever was? There is the open road: I won't be caught by the cameras; what stops me from speeding?!

And the answer, in the bit of Romans 6 which is given to us today, is this word 'grace'. Of course we can still be tempted – and we will sin, just like anyone else. The power of our liberation is still not complete: there is still our natural selves to overcome. In the Greek he uses the word '*hamatia*' to mean that corrupt force that still hangs around us ever since Adam: and the force we have to fight that is not just 'keeping to the law' but something far more generous and enlivening, something that flows – not from our natural selves but from the love of God. As we love God and as we love his Son Jesus, so a new energy is released into our lives which makes the very idea of doing what is wrong impossible.

So what St Paul is trying to share – in this rather convoluted passage – is this. The Law has its place: it is essentially trying to help us to be good. But, like those speed cameras, it does it through fear. We don't want to collect penalty points so we slow down.

The alternative that Jesus offers, is so much better. In order to be free of fear and free of the Law, we take hold of what our baptism offers: living the Resurrection life in the here and now, the longing to do what is best for those around us, for God, and ultimately for ourselves – not because we have to but because love helps us not to want for anything else. Being 'dead to sin' is like living as if we had passed already into God's presence in heaven, except that we can enjoy it in the here and now.

Does that make sense of this reading? Theoretically it makes a lot of sense.

But the temptations that got to Adam, 'hamatia', are not going to disappear. The sad case of the former Bishop of Gloucester Peter Ball, reveals just how difficult an internal war we often have to fight. Under the cover of deepening religious experience he was involved in the abuse of scores of young, impressionable men. And the fall-out has brought not only his own downfall but also that of a former Archbishop of Canterbury and his own brother Michael – also a bishop (indeed the bishop who ordained me to the priesthood back in 1984).

Attempts to cover up what had been going on in private were long and deliberate and involved a great deal of pain for those caught up in what the former bishop had done.

And the best antidote to all that is not just rules and regulations but a new kind of freedom: we don't stop sinning in case we are caught but because our love of God is so much greater.

That is what it is to live the Resurrection life – not after we have died, but now.