



Old Saint Paul's
Lenten Journey

February-April 2023

**Lenten Sermons & Reflections
on Saint Paul**

Introduction

'Tricky', 'unlikeable' and 'misogynistic' are just some of the words I have heard people use of St Paul. More generously, some have also expressed a desire to get to know him and his writings better, given that he occupies a decisive place in the early formation of the Christian faith and that he is, after all, our parish's patron saint.

So in response to these and many other expressions of interest in exploring some of our less frequently visited corners of the New Testament, we decided to invite some friends to help us out. During Lent 2023, we asked five preachers to reflect with us on a particular dimension of St Paul's thought, or on a distinctive approach to his writings. We could, of course, have added many more (and, who knows, we may be tempted to offer a sequel!) but we felt that the five Sundays of Lent would allow us to go deeper into St Paul's thought.

What our five preachers gave us was something much richer than an introductory course – these were, after all, sermons and not lectures. They offered inspiration and challenge, insight and encouragement. I trust that the compilation of these sermon texts will allow you to continue your reflections on St Paul and the faith he did so much to shape.

Fr John



February 26: First Sunday of Lent

Readings:

Rom 5.12-19

Mt 4.1-11



Speaker: The Rev'd Prof Paul Foster,

Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology (New College): Romans: 5.12-19

I wonder, when was the last time you heard a sermon on the topic of sin? My guess is that for many of you the answer is never. The reason for that is such a subject is perhaps, along with politics and religion in general, considered to be something that should not be discussed in polite company – such as I find myself in here today. However, perhaps if you were raised in a different denominational tradition or are of what we euphemistically call 'riper years', then perhaps you might have heard sermons on this subject before. I wonder what you can remember of them? Perhaps an obsessive, almost macabre focus on certain types of dramatic sins, reference to the individual's total depravity, and the concomitant plea to be washed white with the red, red blood of the lamb. In fact, I remember speaking with a noted travelling evangelist who told me that his standard approach was to spend the initial three-quarters of his address convicting people of their sins and wretchedness, prior to turning to the power of the cross as the means for the overthrowing of sin. There would then be a promise that the buses would wait, while convicted sinners received an altar call to come forward to confess their sins and to make a public declaration of faith in Christ. Shall we see if this sermon goes in the same direction, with an altar call at the end. I willing to take bets!

Let me say how delighted I was to receive an invitation from my good friend and colleague John McLuckie to preach here on the first Sunday in Lent. Before accepting, I was wise enough to check quickly my electronic file of sermons to see if I already had one written for this Sunday in the church year. To my huge relief, I already had two prepared. So I replied that I would be delighted to preach, in the full knowledge that this would be a straightforward task. Then John's warm reply came back thanking me for accepting and explaining that at Old Saint Paul's the series for Lent was on your eponymous patron Paul. So John requested, please could you follow the text of the epistle. Let me tell you that my sermons for the first Sunday in Lent are on the gospel text. Do not worry, I was still unperturbed, that was until I read the selected passage. It commences, '... just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned' (Rom 5.12). My heart sank – gendered language, the universality of sin, and having to deal with a text that is so often used to support the doctrine of original sin. This was going to be fun. However, like so much in Paul's letters and especially in the case of Romans, his longest letter, a text like our epistle reading cannot be read in isolation from the whole epistle if one is to grasp Paul's meaning.

The Letter to the Romans is different from most of Paul's other letters (Colossians is another exception). Most of the Pauline letters are written to Christ groups that Paul had established. The purpose of these letters is typically either to help sustain these new communities, or to give them a good telling-off for their various lapses. Romans, however, is different. It is written to the Christ believers in the imperial capital prior to a planned visit in order that Paul might set before them his understanding of the gospel. Most scholars understand the central thesis of the letter to be presented in Rom 1.16-17, where Paul writes, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everybody who believes, to the Jew first, then also to the Greek.'

Paul's key claim undergirding both this letter and also his self-understanding as apostle to the Gentiles is that the good news of Jesus eradicates any sense of ethnic privilege thereby making relationship with God possible for all people. In this letter, Paul goes to great lengths to show that the love of God is equally available to all, and in his binary worldview the chief distinction that is removed is that between Jew and Gentile. Again and again, throughout the letter he makes this very point. Towards the end of chapter three, Paul declares that the 'righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, for there is no distinction' (Rom 3.22). Immediately following this, Paul makes one of his most famous statements concerning sin. He writes, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3.23). Unlike many of the sermons you may have heard on the topic of sin, Paul does not spend three-quarters of his time obsessively cataloguing individual sins. Instead, after describing the common human condition of brokenness and failure, which he describes as sin, he speaks of the divine forgiveness available in Jesus and the forbearance of God in passing over sins previously committed. That is, Paul's message is fundamentally a message of God providing healing and restoring wholeness through Christ, rather than being fixated upon the salacious details of human failings.

When we come to our passage for today we jump into the middle of another of Paul's arguments. Again, Paul wishes to explain the universality of the human condition. He states that even from the first sin of Adam, human failure and the inability to act in accordance with the intention of God was the shared experience of all people. He then undercuts any claims of superiority or privilege on the part of his fellow Jews. In response to the claim that the Law made things better in this regard, he states that in one way the Law actually made things worse. The Law provided a juridical standard by which sin could be measured and hence guilt could be imputed. Yet, this is not Paul's key point in this passage. Rather, he is more fundamentally interested in how that universal and debilitating experience of sin is undone in Christ, and in its place the perfect and divinely intended mode of human existence is restored. Here Paul develops his second Adam christology, describing Christ as that second Adam who to the fight and to the rescue came. Paul tells recipients of his letter that the first Adam through an act of disobedience brought sin and death into the world. By contrast, the second Adam, the one who assumed human flesh and lived our common human life reversed the consequences of the actions of the first Adam. Yet, Paul does not simply see Christ's actions as the inverse of those of Adam. He states, 'the gift is not like the transgression' (Rom 5.15). The word translated in English as 'gift' is the Greek word *χάρις*. It ranges in meaning, encapsulating ideas of gift and grace. Paul sees this gift as being more powerful and more extensive in its effects than was the case with the sin of Adam. How precisely Paul sees Christ's act as surpassing the universal effect of Adam's sin is not entirely obvious. However, the answer might be found in verse 17. According to Paul, not only does Christ's death, that is his gift of himself, reverse the death that Adam's sin brought to the many, Paul claims that the gift of Christ brings an abundance of grace which enables humans not only to receive life, but leads to participating in reigning with Christ. That is, the gift of Christ is not just mere restoration to the human state before the sin of Adam, it is transformation enabling those who receive such grace to enter into a higher state of existence which Paul frequently refers to using the shorthand expression being 'in Christ'.

One thing you should know about me is that I pride myself on being a very boring lecturer. I do not go in for all that new-fangled feel-good application stuff. However, after one fairly typically dull lecture some years ago on 1 Corinthians 7 – where Paul articulates views on marriage and celibacy, I was stopped by one young female student. She said she wanted to ask me a question. I braced myself to launch into a disquisition on the finer points of the Greek text. Yet, actually, that day none of that was what mattered. You may consider her question naïve, and you might be right. But with a shaky voice, she prefaced her question with the phrase 'I have a friend who wants to know...'. Now I think we all perhaps can recognise the transparency of those words, 'I have a friend'.

Her enquiry went something like this: 'I have a friend, she is a Christian and that really matters to her, she has done something she regrets, and she wants to know if she can become a virgin again?' Yes, at one level the question is of course incredibly naïve, and yet at another it encapsulated a deep sense of failure and emptiness. As tears welled-up in her eyes, I must confess that I did not discuss medical possibilities or impossibilities. Indeed, my response would not have passed muster with any medical association. Instead, I tried to do something I would never do in my intentionally dusty and stodgy lectures – I tried application. We spoke about what the message of new life in Christ really meant at its deepest level, how relationships could be put right, how people could be made whole again, and how true forgiveness enabled one to move on without always living in a sea of regrets. What we spoke about was how the gift of Christ not only overcomes our own sense of sin, but actually leads us to something better. That is to a new mode of existence in Christ, with Christ alive in us by the indwelling presence of the Spirit. Did I answer her question? Well, I leave you to judge that.

Today, we have only read a short excerpt of Paul's argument. If we had even started at the beginning of chapter 5, we would have heard Paul's lofty declaration that 'we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5.1), and a few verses later that 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (Rom 5.5). Paul does not speak about sin in order to guilt those who hear his message into coming to faith. Rather, he talks realistically and honestly about the human experience of brokenness and failure, that sense of being less than we are meant to be. Writing in his own context, he seeks to establish that his fellow Jews are no less immune from the common human condition than the rest of humanity. As people of faith that is a message we need to hear this day and always. We do not receive the free gift of God because we are any better or any different from others, we receive it precisely because we are like other people. In common with others we all have experienced brokenness, failed relationships, treating others in ways that debases their humanity, and in the process we have settled for a diminished mode of human existence, instead of allowing ourselves to be transformed by the fulness of life in Christ. Paul the apostle, who proclaims new life in the Spirit, tells us that there is a better way. That way undoes our failings, it heals our brokenness, and it elevates each one of us to a new mode of risen life in Christ Jesus.

In a moment we will gather round a table, where bread broken and wine poured out will be offered for the healing of the nations and for the restoration of all humanity. Today, it is not me or any human who calls you to this altar, but God's own son who bids you come, who calls you to the wholeness of life that is available without distinction to all humanity. For he is the second Adam who not only restores us, but transforms us to live lives where we reign with him. As we gather round this altar where the broken are restored, the weak are healed, and sinners forgiven, this day we will offer our hearts' devotion to the one to whom belongs all might, majesty, power, and glory, both now in this mortal life and in that risen life when we shall ever reign with Christ. Amen.

Paul Foster

For Reflection & Discussion:

Paul, the First Christian Theologian?

1. Does the church still need theology?
2. Is Paul a hindrance to the Christian message in the twenty-first century?
3. Should we stop speaking about sin, and only mention love?

March 5: Second Sunday of Lent

Readings:

Rom 4.1-5, 13-17

Jn 3.1-17

Speaker: The Rev'd Prof Gordon Graham,

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and the Arts (Princeton Theological Seminary)



Do you Want to be Free? St Paul on Faith and Works

It has been said, probably correctly, that the philosopher Immanuel Kant had the most brilliant analytic mind that humanity has ever exhibited. The trouble was that this great brilliance was not matched by his ability to write. Kant's mastery of written German is so limited, in fact, that the tortured way in which he expressed his thoughts presents even German speakers with great difficulty. Everyone agrees about the astonishing profundity of his philosophy, while acknowledging the great struggle we have to understand it.

Something similar might be said about St Paul. He is a profound theologian, Christianity's first and arguably most influential, in fact. But he expresses his theological insights in an extraordinarily obscure way. Here's a sentence from his *Letter to the Romans* which we heard a few minutes ago.

“Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness”.

Did you get that? What on earth does it mean? To be fair to Paul, on pastoral occasions he could write superbly well. Consider his famous reflections on love in the 13th chapter of the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, or his beautiful hymn of praise in *Philippians* – ‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow’. But his theological writings, especially in the *Letter to the Romans*, are not like this. They are dense and difficult. Who knows what the original recipients of this letter could have made of it?

Yet Christians ever since have seen that we have to make something of it. Paul was the first person to wrestle with a major question. How does faith in Jesus Christ fit in with the inheritance of Jewish law and theology? Before Paul's conversion, the answer was easy. Christians were heretics, all talk of Jesus as the Messiah was a violation of Jewish orthodoxy, and had to be stamped out. After his conversion, it might be thought, the situation was also simple. The old Jewish religion, together with the scriptures and theology that went with it could be ditched. The life teaching, death and Resurrection of Jesus had rendered them redundant and ushered in something completely new. Some early Christians did think this, but not Paul. All that he had hitherto believed and lived for, he held, was not destroyed but brought to completion in the acknowledgment of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus himself had told the disciples “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (*Matt* 5:17). The question Paul asked himself was “How has it been fulfilled?”.

In wrestling with this question, Paul soon realized that the key issue was the relation between 'faith' and 'works'. 'Faith' means believing that Jesus is the true way to a relationship with the God of Abraham and Isaac. 'Works' means continuing to believe that Jewish laws such as the Ten Commandments and the commandment to love your neighbor still apply and ought to be followed. Since neither could be relinquished, Paul's problem was see how they could be combined.

When we add to the category of 'works' the ethical principles that Jesus propounded— 'Love your enemy' 'Do good to those who hate' and so on — the problem is intensified, and from an early stage Christian opinion has tended to divide sharply. Some have followed the line that we find in the *Epistle of James*: faith without works is dead; true religion in the sight of God is "to look after orphans and widows in trouble" (*James* 1:27). But Luther declared *James* an 'Epistle of straw', and many others have followed in this. We can do good works like looking after widows and orphans without knowing or believing anything about Jesus.

Sometimes this division of opinion seems more like a difference of attitude or inclination, the difference illustrated in the Gospel story about Mary and Martha. Martha is the practical one. She isn't very reflective about who Jesus is, but she gets things done, and offers real hospitality. Mary is the dreamy one. She loves 'spiritual' talk with Jesus, but this deflects her from offering any practical help. In the light of this story, some church people are fond of saying, perhaps with a greater of pride than they ought to, 'I'm more a Martha than a Mary' and the difference between the two is certainly worth thinking about. But this is not the issue that concerns Paul. He is aware of deeper theological difficulties. If we opt for works over faith, then following the rules and acting in the right way is good enough; we can save ourselves; we don't need Jesus. He is our teacher, and a fine example to us maybe. But he is not our Saviour, and his death on the Cross didn't accomplish anything. On the other hand, if we opt for faith over works, it seems that the way we live our lives and the good we try to do is incidental. What matters is inward belief. Yet such inward belief might lie behind even the most despicable of lives. That's the point so brilliantly illustrated in James Hogg's Scottish classic *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

Paul, then, is warning the Christians at Rome that spiritual dangers lie on both sides of the faith *versus* works dilemma. To appreciate his insight you need to ask yourself this question. Do you believe in spiritual *dangers*? Do you believe in them as firmly as you believe in dangers to health, safety, and prosperity? Being aware of spiritual danger is what marks out religious people. Like the world in general, they think that health, security and prosperity are important. But they also think that life's ultimate question is about spiritual, not material, well-being. And the greatest danger of all is *spiritual* death.

That's what Paul is referring to when he says that 'the wages of sin is death'. Sin is fatal to the spirit, not the body. But then he adds: 'And the strength of sin is the Law'. What a puzzling thing to say? What could he mean? He means, I think, that while the purpose of ethical and religious rules is to further and enrich our spiritual life, the wrong attitude to those rules can itself be a barrier to this. Sin, oddly, is strengthened not weakened by rule worship.

Paul says again and again, in *Romans* and elsewhere, that he is a Jew, and proud to be a well-trained, highly educated Pharisee. His conversion, though, revealed to him the dangers of what we might call Pharisee-*ism*. Hitherto, he had avidly adhered to biblical rules, principles and regulations. But he had done so in a way that made them a barrier. Far from being an aid to spiritual life, they had shut him off from the presence of God.

Pharisee-*ism* is not confined to individual conduct. The Jewish world in which Paul was raised was dominated by a culture of Pharisee-*ism*. Other societies have fallen victim to it too. Truth be told, *our* world is dominated by Pharisee-*ism*. Consider the values we share, and all the good ends we aim to strive for – health, safety, mutual respect, cultural diversity, environmental responsibility. Isn't it true that we lack faith in the power of these values to inspire and motivate? Isn't true that we are driven by fear and anxiety? People won't conform, we think, they'll act recklessly and we'll all suffer. So we reach for compulsion, and put innumerable rules, regulations and legal requirements in place whose point is to force people to act in accordance with the values we supposedly share.

The last few years have demonstrated the destructive power of Pharisee-*ism*. In response to the pandemic, more and more restrictions and limitations were put in place, all in the name of health and safety. But we are just beginning to understand the profound spiritual cost that was involved. People were compelled to die alone, relatives were denied the opportunity to console each other in their grief. The socially isolated were forced into still greater isolation. Childhood development was stunted. The fearful were driven to ever greater heights of anxiety. Mental illness was intensified. With the compliance of the Church, corporate worship of God and sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion was suspended for months on end. In short, the Body of Christ was prevented from assembling, and the life of the spirit was put on hold.

This extraordinary intrusion into spiritual life was not the result of callousness or political self-serving. All these rules were made in the name of science, and for the sake of health and safety. Yet the spiritual cost was enormous, the effort was ultimately futile, and the whole episode powerfully illustrates Paul's point about 'the Law'. Rules are just an instrument. Putting your *faith* in them undermines the very thing they are supposed to promote and protect. The proper object of faith is not a rule but a person, the person of Jesus Christ, who "though he was in the form of God, shared our human lot and was obedient, even to the point of death" (*Philippians 2:8*)

It's notable that even the most draconian rules secured the approval of the vast majority of people. That is because we approach so many things with an attitude of caution, and this easily turns to anxiety and fear. We are afraid not to put our faith in rules, afraid of the freedom that the life of the spirit requires, deeply unsure that we can trust the world God has created for us. I am reminded of the episode in John's Gospel where Jesus asks a paralysed man who for years had been lying at the Sheep Gate pool in Jerusalem: "Do you *want* to be healed?" (John 5: 6). The answer seems obvious, but just for this reason, it is one of most penetrating questions Jesus asks anyone. So too, having placed our faith so much and for so long in rules, we encounter this question: Do you want to be free?

Gordon Graham

For Reflection & Discussion:

1. Do your inclinations lie with Martha or Mary?
2. Is Paul's Christ a theological enrichment or a distraction from the Jesus of the Gospels?
3. Should we think of Paul as a very influential leader of the early Church, or truly one of the Apostles?

March 12: Third Sunday of Lent

Readings:

Rom 5.1-11

Jn 4.5-42

Speaker: Dr Lana Woolford,
Iconographer and Old Saint Paul's People's Warden



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

In October 2019, Paul Martin of blessed memory set up a small iconography school for OSP in his garden workshop, with Ginger Franklin, Andrew Paterson and me as his students. In our first session, he explained that once we had done some basic drawing exercises, we would each be painting an icon of St Paul to form part of the worship in this space.

Ginger and I turned to each other – looks were exchanged - and we sighed. Of all the saints to be our first icon, why Paul of all people? Couldn't we do someone nice and uncontroversial like the Mother of God?

Our response, I think, is a fairly common one in the liberal Episcopalian tradition, and it's not hard to see why. Paul's letters have been used to oppress and ostracise women and queer people, and to uphold damaging patriarchies and slavery as part of 'God's natural order'. His teachings have been cited in Islam as corrupting those of the Prophet Jesus, and in both Jewish and Christian scholarship as responsible for the Church's institutional antisemitism. His writings have been interpreted to form doctrines of pre-destination, producing centuries of either anxious or presuming Christians, convinced that from birth they were already on the list for heaven or for hell. Today those same churches may be of the opinion that in light of St Paul's words, liturgy like ours, traditional and seasonal, makes Old Saint Paul's very much of the law and not the spirit.

The thing I found irritating about St Paul was feeling that he'd switched from one extreme position to another, and still got to monopolise the New Testament. For me, that felt like the early world equivalent of a climate change denier having a sudden change of heart and making a wildly successful podcast about their new ecological views, while the rest of us plebs have been quietly sorting our recycling and using public transport for years.

So, our salty saint is an easy man to hate and for me, was an ill-fitting patron for the people of Old Saint Paul's; whether traditional, radical, neither or both. This is the story of my conversion to St Paul, not with blinding light and sound on the road to Damascus, but through the silent uncreated light of icons.

We started our classes by looking at different reference icons of Paul, from ancient to contemporary. If you follow Andrew's entries in the White Rose, you will also know that we had the privilege of rotating between each other's drawings as we worked, at least in the first instance. This was so that the four likenesses, 'hypostases' of Paul emerged in community, and not out of individual gripes with the saint or the human tendency to perfectionist ownership of a particular drawing.

I had been struck in the references by depictions of Paul's theological brilliance and deep understanding of the law, as we've already heard about in this Lent series. That's often depicted in icons by the combination of a large forehead, piercing gaze and scrolls in tow. In the icons of my companions there was sorrow, energetic zeal, love for Christ's Gospel and indeed for his fellow martyr. Understanding Paul in this cross-shaped context – through the eyes of my brothers and sisters both living and departed – started to instil a sense of the saint not as a caricature that I'd perhaps neglected out of contempt, but a complex human being seen, as all of us are, through a tiny keyhole by everyone except God, in whose image we are made.

Each week in our class, we prayed together and read a little of either Paul's letters, or Luke's account of him in Acts. Paul Martin also invited each of us to give our own talk on the saint, which was completely terrifying, but at least encouraged some background reading that I probably would never have done otherwise.

This was the first time I'd engaged with Scripture not through the lectionary readings or a particular feast or theological theme, but to try and get to grips with a real and potentially problematic person. Give it a go if you haven't already. In John's Gospel today, Jesus gives us a pattern for this. He doesn't hesitate to break taboo, to approach the Samaritan woman and thirst for encounter. His attitude tells us that meeting the Other can help us grow. As with Paul, this woman's encounter with Christ leaves her as a converted missionary, who leaves her water jar behind to seek and share living water, spirit and truth.

Without realising it, Paul's iconography school had given me the best, the most practical lesson in loving my enemy that I've ever received. We hadn't been allowed to grudgingly accept our patron and move on. We had engaged over weeks and months to learn about St Paul, to pray about and with him, to paint him in compassionate observation; converting him from an oppressive caricature to a three dimensional person; a thirsty, broken saint.

I started with a sketch that embodied Paul the Apostle as an upright scholar, holding tightly to heavy scripture with both hands. But as we drew and read and prayed together, the saint that emerged on the icon board was one whose encounter with the Gospel had allowed him to let go of his fierce grip of the law, one hand extended in welcome and invitation.

His conversion didn't transplant his personality. It transfigured his zealousness for perfection into a thirst for love and adventure in the name of the Kingdom of Heaven. In a mirroring of Jesus' words in today's Gospel, Paul's motivation and "food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."

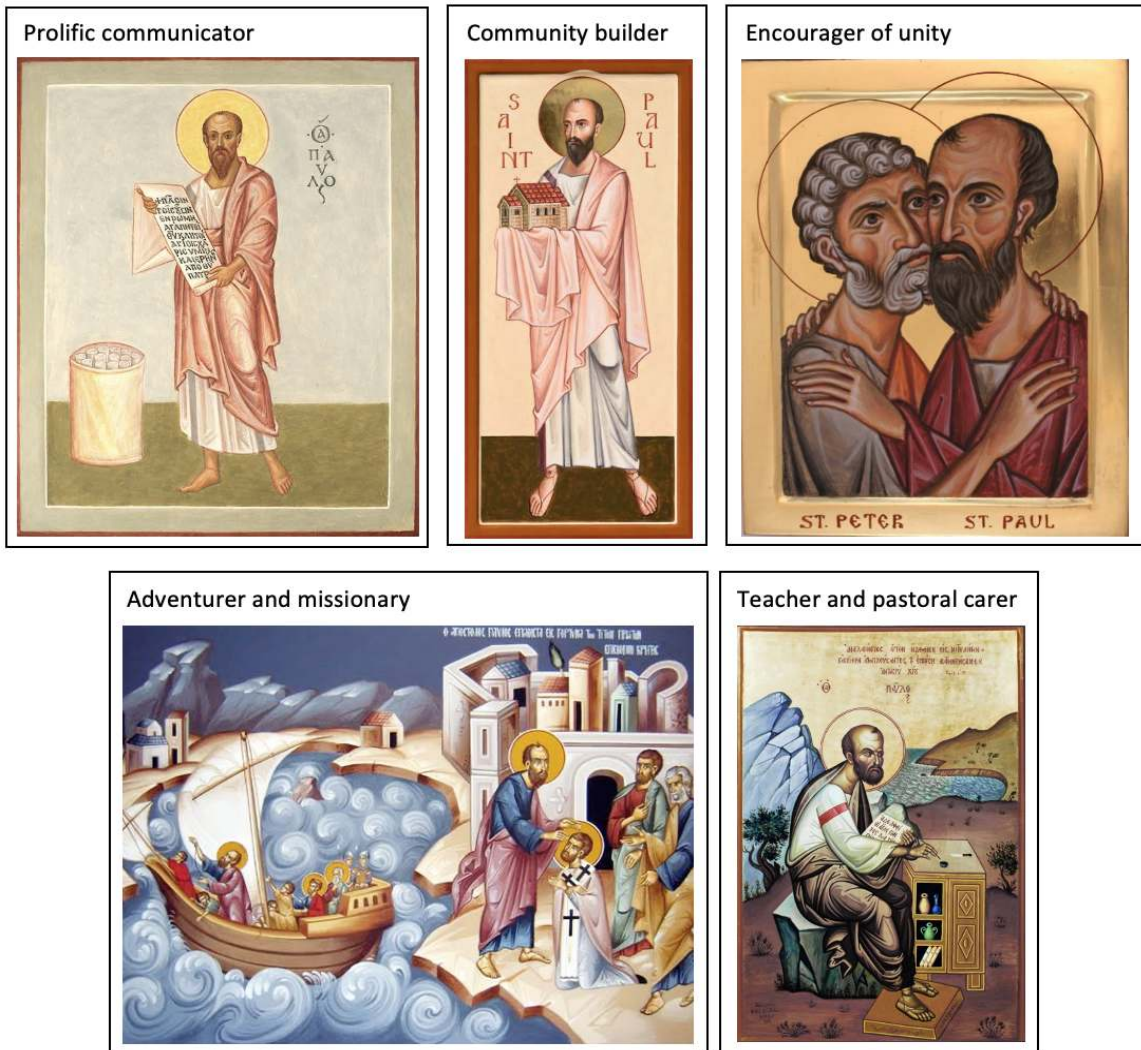
In today's reading from his letter to the Romans, Paul celebrates our right to approach the altar steps, to seek this food and inhabit grace in the midst of suffering. He then begins to paint a picture of Christian life in which all of the ancient promises of God come true – the centre of which is peace between God and us. Paul realises that Christ is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets at a universal level. His whole personal ministry reflects this – the fulfilment of his theological prowess and devotion to detail wasn't a glittering career in the law or as a lecturer, but to take on Christ's pastoral heart. He wrote real, complex encouragement to real, complex communities, all the while navigating the paradox of his own calling to be Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles across ten thousand miles of ocean.

So, is St Paul a good patron for us? That's really for you to decide. But as a man who reconciled his deeply held traditions with a radical call from Jesus to follow him out into the world, who used that creative tension to fuel a ministry dedicated to encounter with the stranger and to the flourishing of community and restored creation, I hope and pray that he would fit right in.

In short, my friends, if we can learn to love Paul, we can learn to love ourselves and our neighbour. Amen.

For Reflection and Discussion:

1. Below are some icons of Paul that emphasise different aspects of his sainthood.
 - a. Which do you most associate with him?
 - b. Are there any that you disagree with, or think are omitted?
 - c. Which do you see most in yourself?



2. Do you think we can truly get to know someone through scripture or through prayer? Or do we only learn a bit more about ourselves?

3. Whether St Paul has been misrepresented, mistranslated, falsely attributed or truly believed some of the things he is blamed for (e.g. oppression of women in the Church), the reality is that his writings have been used to damage underprivileged groups for centuries.

What is the best way for us to engage with these passages to address the damage? Do we ignore them, accept them as 'of their time', engage more with scholarship, or something else?

March 19: Fourth Sunday of Lent

Readings:

Eph 5.8-14

Jn 9.1-41

Speaker: The Rev'd Prof Alison Jack,
Professor of Bible and Literature and Principal of New College



Paul in the Literature/Religion Nexus

This morning I've been asked to preach on St Paul in the religion and literature nexus, which must take the prize for the most specific request that's ever been made on my powers of preaching. But I'm delighted to have been invited to preach here in Old St Paul's and I hope I've risen to the challenge!

And I'm going to start, not with the words of Paul, but with the words of one of Scotland's greatest, possibly most eccentric poets, and his literary re-imagining of a Pauline doctrine. Please imagine you're a bystander in a graveyard in Dumfries when the last trumpet sounds. Here's Hugh McDiarmid's '*Crowdieknowe*':

Oh to be at Crowdieknowe
When the last trumpet blows,
An see the deid come loupin owre
The auld grey wa's

Muckle men wi tousled beards,
I grat at as a bairn
'Il scramble frae the croodit clay
Wi feck o swearin.

An glower at God an a' his gang
O angels i the lift
- Thae trashy bleezin French-like folk
Wha gar'd them shift.

Fain the weemun-folk'll seek
To mak them haud their row
- Fegs, God's no blate gin he stirs up
The men o Crowdieknowe!

I suspect this is not the scene imagined by Paul when he wrote in 1Corinthians 15: 50 I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

In his typically snarky way, McDiarmid brings perhaps complacently held biblical truths down to earth, suggesting that some, such as his own grandfather safely buried at Crowdieknowe, might actually prefer to stay where they are, rather than be howked out of the ground at the last trumpet. Often when poetry interacts with biblical theology it heightens and elevates into metaphor the dry doctrine. Here poetry's engagement with this biblical hope brings it right back down to earth, and its pretty mucky and begrudging. McDiarmid is asking us to consider what being raised from the dead at the last trumpet might actually look like and is playfully presenting one alternative to us which deflates Paul's vision and hope.

MacDiarmid was no friend to the Christian faith or the church and he deliberately leaves us in the graveyard. Paul's engagement with ideas of resurrection go much further, of course, and he tries to present new ways to imagine what being a raised body might be like, clothed with imperishability, the corrupt clothed with incorruption. I want to spend a wee bit of time thinking about the engagement of another poet with these Pauline imaginings, and it's a poet about whom your own curate is much more of an expert than I am- so be ready to address any questions later to her, rather than to me!

But I'm drawing heavily here on the work of a friend and fellow scholar who has published in this area, Caroline Blyth, and here is the reference to her work if you want to follow it up:

'Bringing the Apostle Down to Earth: Emily Dickinson Wrestles with Paul', in *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, 2019.

So let's have a look at the nineteenth century American poet, Emily Dickinson, and what she might have to contribute to the religion and literature nexus as it relates to Paul. First, in some of her writing, rather than challenging Pauline ideas about resurrection with images of the earthly, Dickinson suggests that we might avoid focusing on the afterlife at all and instead celebrate the sacredness and sanctity of life in the here and now.

In some at least of her engagements with Paul's writings, Dickinson takes the apostle to task for what she considered to be his overtly spiritual and heaven-centered gaze. She appropriates Paul's writings in order to challenge him to acknowledge the inherent value and delight that could be encountered in this world rather than the next.

In a letter to a friend in 1873, Dickinson describes the beautiful location of her friend's home as "paradise." Dickinson writes that she has never believed paradise to be "a supernatural site"; as she contemplates the delights of her own locality that very afternoon, she goes on that "Eden, always eligible, is peculiarly so this noon. It would please you to see how intimate the Meadows are with the Sun." Dickinson sees here the actual, the Edenic, and the "heavenly" in the world around her, rejecting any future immortality in favour of that which she can see, taste, and feel in the here and now. She then alludes to the Pauline teaching of the corruptible and perishable nature of this current life in 1 Cor 15 which we've been focusing on, where Paul states that the corruptible "must put on incorruption" at the time of the resurrection.

Speaking of her sister Vinnie and her father, both converts to the Trinitarian Congregational Church, Dickinson writes, "While the Clergyman tells Father and Vinnie that 'this Corruptible shall put on Incorruption'—it has already done so and they got defrauded." For Dickinson, Paul is the architect of this "fraud," who invites believers such as her father and sister to look forward to the imminent coming of the incorruptible Kingdom of God, in which 'Death is swallowed up in victory'.

Dickinson, however, challenges the apostle's heavenward gaze and insists that paradise can instead be viewed as a divinely-created earthly domain to be enjoyed now, rather than an unknowable, uncertain, and intangible "supernatural site" that will only be revealed in some distant, numinous future. As she says in a poem written to her brother in 1877, "Earth is Heaven—/Whether Heaven is Heaven or not." It's a strikingly modern and maybe we could even say ecologically astute understanding of the world we inhabit. And maybe 'Earth is Heaven-/Whether Heaven is Heaven or not' is what you need to hear today.

Let me give you one more example of the way this perceptive and imaginative poet engages with the enigmatic words of Paul in 1Corinthians 15.

In a letter sent to her second cousin after the tragic death of his infant daughter in 1880, Dickinson turns to 1 Cor 15:35, where, right in the midst of his affirmation of the truth of resurrection, Paul cites two questions asked of him by sceptics: "How are the dead raised? With what type of body do they come?" In answer, Paul attempts to open up the futility of such questions, as he emphasizes the discontinuity between the present earthly body and the future resurrection body; the former, he claims, has limited glory, being perishable and temporary, while the latter will be wholly different— spiritual, eternal, and far more glorious than its mortal counterpart. Exactly what visible or recognizable form these "differences" will take is left unexplained by Paul;

however, in a poem included in the letter to her grieving cousin, Dickinson brings her own meaning to the Apostle's words in her attempt to "revision" the familiar, earthly body as the eternal home or embodiment of the soul:

'And with what body do they come?' -
Then they do come - Rejoice!
What Door - What Hour - Run - run - My Soul!
Illuminate the House!

'Body!' Then real - a Face and Eyes -
To know that it is them!
Paul knew the Man that knew the News -
He passed through Bethlehem -

This is a poem of radiant joy and comfort, building on the Pauline words of hope in the reality of resurrection- 'Then they do come- Rejoice!'. Dickinson's not interested in the nature of the risen body, as Paul's opponents are. Instead she celebrates here the familiarity and bodiliness of the immortal soul, which retains the same body, face, and eyes, enabling each person to recognize, always, those they have previously loved and lost. It is the possibility of the similarity between the body before and after death and the recognizability of the resurrected body that thrills her: "*Body! Then real—a Face and Eyes—/ To know that it is them!*". Even Dickinson's own soul is embodied here, with legs that will "run" to prepare the house for those who will return. She revises Pauline priorities in this passage: she's not interested in his insistence on the newness of the resurrected body, and she imagines Jesus, the source of this great resurrection promise, as simply the earthly Man who 'passed through' Bethlehem bringing promises of eternal life rather than a more lofty heavenly figure. But she offers her cousin, and maybe herself, a heart-stopping glimpse of hope in a resurrection and reunion event—when those who have been loved and so sorely lost will again be illuminated with light and recognized in all their glorious bodily familiarity.

And maybe 'Then they do come—Rejoice! ...Then real—a Face and Eyes— To know that it is them!—' is what you need to hear today.

So we've heard how two very different poets have read Paul. I'd like to close with Paul's own words and what they might have to say about the religion and literature nexus which is at the heart of this sermon. Although I doubt he would put it that way. In 2Timothy 4.13, Paul writes to his young protégé Timothy:

'When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.'

Paul has obviously left behind some things that are precious to him- things he's missing. A cloak to keep him warm, parchment to write on. And books to nourish his mind and soul. As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon said of this tiny insight into the everyday life of Paul:

Paul is inspired, and yet he wants books!

He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books!

He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books!

He had had a wider experience than most people, and yet he wants books!

He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a person to utter, yet he wants books!

The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, "Give thyself unto reading." The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own.

What more inspiring word can any of us hope for, whether preacher or not. Permission, encouragement to give ourselves time to read. So, a word for us all from Paul himself- 'Bring the books'.

For Reflection and Discussion:

How has poetry helped you explore some of the ideas we find in Paul's letters?

March 26: Fifth Sunday of Lent

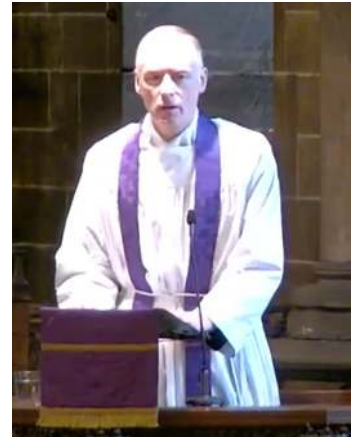
Passion Sunday

Readings:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Rom 8.6-11

Jn 11.1-45



Speaker: The Rev'd Prof Mark Harris,
Professor of Natural Science and Theology (New College)

You will have spotted that all of the readings for today – this Sunday which marks the beginning of Passiontide – are concerned with resurrection; more a theme – you might think – for the Easter season rather than Passiontide, where we would be expecting to focus on the cross of Christ and the meaning of atonement. Well, I hope to make some sense of this in terms of what I was actually asked to talk to you about today, which is St Paul and the science-and-religion nexus. Clearly, I've got some major themes swirling in and out of focus here – cross, atonement, Paul, science, religion – and the common thread binding them together isn't immediately obvious. To add to the complications, for two of those themes – science and religion – our modern secular world widely assumes that there are no common threads at all, because science and religion are at war with each other, engaged in a fight to the death.

Well, that might be the widespread assumption, but it turns out to be wildly inaccurate. My day job in the University of Edinburgh is taken up with teaching and researching that assumption (and others) about science and religion: where those assumptions are right, and where they are wrong. And I can tell you with some confidence that, yes, there is certainly conflict between some scientific ideas and some religious beliefs (most obviously between evolution and young-earth creationism), but there are plenty of other areas where there's no conflict at all, and some where there's scope for very positive interaction. I want to spend my time with you today reflecting on perhaps the grandest area for positive interaction, which turns out to be the elusive common thread binding together today's swirling themes. That common thread is what I call the 'Cosmic Christ', the idea that the humble carpenter's son from Nazareth, who died as a criminal on a Roman cross, has come to be recognised by Christians as King of the universe, and not only that, but as the creator of all worlds, present since the beginning: fashioning and guiding the universe through its destiny. That is quite a CV for a carpenter's son from Nazareth. How did he earn it?

Well, modern science has a part to play in this story, and I'll get to that later. But first, St Paul, because he's central to the Cosmic Christ idea. Remember that Paul was originally a Pharisee, and was such a vehement enemy of followers of Jesus that he hunted them down. Something happened on the road to Damascus that convinced him to completely re-assess his life as a Pharisee, and to become a follower of Jesus. That something was an encounter – what Paul calls an 'apocalypse' (a revelation) – with the Cosmic Christ.

It was reflecting on this experience of apocalypse which led Paul to the conclusion that the carpenter's son from Nazareth was also the creator of the heavens and the earth, even though we're pretty sure that Jesus himself never taught that to his disciples. In one of Paul's earliest letters, 1 Corinthians – one of the very oldest Christian texts we have, just 20 years after the crucifixion – we find Paul saying this astonishing thing: '...for us there is one God, the Father; from whom are all things and we exist for him, and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through him (1 Cor.8:6, my translation).' I can't emphasise how astonishing this statement is about the carpenter's son from Nazareth, he is 'the one Lord...through whom are all things'. Paul is trying to explain to the Corinthian Christians how to live in a pagan culture which recognises many gods and has many customs and rules around those gods. And his argument is simply this: we Christians have one God, the Cosmic Christ, the maker of all: we alone are those who are free.

It's a stunning argument, and Paul uses it at several points in his writings. But how did he come to it? After all, the carpenter's son doesn't seem to have used that argument himself. It seems that Paul came to this argument by reflecting on the resurrection of Jesus and on that experience of apocalypse on his way to Damascus. And we have the evidence in that same letter, 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. As a Pharisee, Paul had believed in resurrection, for sure, but for the last day – the Day of Judgement – where all of the dead will be raised, not just one man in the middle of world history.

For Paul the Pharisee then, resurrection was the key to unlocking the meaning of this world and its transition into the next. Paul didn't abandon that belief on the Damascus road, he re-interpreted it. He realized that because of the resurrection of this one man in the middle of world history, Jesus was the meaning for the making of this world and the next. So, to emphasise, because it's so important and so astonishing: Paul squared his prior belief (as a Pharisee) that resurrection was the key to the universe, with his experience on the road to Damascus, by concluding that the carpenter's son was the entire reason the cosmos had been made in the first place: Jesus is the fulfilment of all people, all lives, all animals, all plants, all planets, all suns, all atoms, all particles, all quantum fields, even spacetime itself; he is the guiding principle of all, their beginning and their end; the blueprint for all of creation.

Science gets into this picture. The logic of Paul's argument is that the carpenter's son didn't just save humans from their sins, but he also embodies the physical pattern of this world and the next. Inevitably, theologians have looked to the sciences to find some insight. And they've found plenty, especially in the intriguing observation known as the 'Anthropic Principle', which arises from the observation that the laws of nature, and the physical constants, appear to be precisely right for life. If they were even fractionally different, then there would be no life on earth, perhaps no planets, stars, or even atoms in the universe. The astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, made this point in his book, *Just Six Numbers*, where he pointed out that the form of our universe is balanced on a knife-edge defined by only six numbers, six fundamental physical constants. What if they'd been slightly different? Would we still be here? Probably not. Is it reasonable to conclude then, that there's a fundamental principle at play, guiding the evolution of our universe – an Anthropic Principle – such that human (anthropic) life exists in our universe? And if so, is this evidence of a Creator who finely-tuned the laws of nature and physical constants at creation so that we would evolve? Some people believe that – especially in the Intelligent Design movement – but this is an area of massive debate, and I don't want to get into that so much as to draw the parallels with the Cosmic Christ.

If I've understood Paul correctly, that Christ is the blueprint of this world and the next, then the Anthropic Principle is a kind of scientific parallel. We might even say that the carpenter's son was implanted into the laws of nature and the physical constants from the beginning; he was predestined in the physics of the Big Bang. Don't take this as read from me, though: there's much here that's debatable in scientific, philosophical and theological terms, and I invite you to discuss it afterwards. But I do want to make two points from this, taking Paul's logic further.

First, we don't know why the sciences are so effective at uncovering the deepest secrets of the universe. There's no scientific theory of science that explains why science works. There is a theological theory of science though, which works beautifully, it's the Cosmic Christ: he embodies the blueprint of the universe; he is the source of its physical laws and fundamental constants. The sciences work because of the carpenter's son; by doing science, we are learning about him.

Second, as Passiontide begins today, and we think of Jesus' suffering and death in first century Jerusalem, the logic of the Cosmic Christ teaches us that Jesus' passion isn't parochial – localised to first century Jerusalem, nor even to human life on planet earth – but it's reflected in the rest of life on earth, in the life of the universe, in every atom and quantum field in spacetime. The death of the carpenter's son on the cross might be reconciliation for sinful humanity, for sure, but it was written into the universe at its beginning, and it tells us about the glorious transformation of this world into the next by means of his resurrection.

So, if Paul the Pharisee is to be believed, the Cosmic Christ is the meaning and the impetus behind all things, including the physical world. Humanly speaking, the success of science has remained something of a mystery. Paul's letters – and his idea of the Cosmic Christ – supply us with an explanation for the miracle of modern science, namely its unstoppable success in understanding the physical world: it is because science taps directly into the one who made it all.

For Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why did I keep using the name 'carpenter's son' rather than Jesus or Christ? Was this helpful or distracting?
2. What has the body of Jesus to do with creation?
3. Do you think that fine-tuning is good evidence that God exists? What alternative views might there be to explain fine tuning, and are these compatible with religious belief?
4. Should the sciences be in harmony with religious belief? Or are they independent of faith? How would you describe the relationship?
5. Is the resurrection of Jesus a miracle or an act of creation (or something else)? Does it make a difference?

