

28.06.20 CHS Ro. 6:12-23, Matt. 10:40-42, Ps. 89:1-4,15-18, Jer. 28:5-9

I read on the news that the American singer Bob Dylan has made UK music sales chart history. He has become the oldest artist to reach number one in the UK charts with an album of new material. He's 79 years old. I think it will be a long time before K-Pop bands BTS or Black Pink, will challenge for that record!

Why am I telling you this? Well a full fifteen years after Bob Dylan had his first UK number one album, he went through what is known as his "Christian phase" and wrote a song called: "You gotta' serve somebody". That song is very relevant to our Bible readings today because it contains the lines:

"You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame
You may be living in another country under another name
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody..."

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Romans chapter 6, verse 11, he tells the believers there to count themselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ. If they're alive to God and dead to sin, that's got to make a difference in how they live.

To say to a slave: "Don't behave like a slave" is mockery but it's something you could meaningfully say to a person who's been set free.

Maybe you're familiar with stories about animals released from captivity or work and though they're set free they still exhibit the same behaviour as before. So the horse that used to grind corn, continues to walk round and round in circles, or the tiger keeps on pacing up and down behind the imaginary bars of a cage that isn't there. It's known as habituated behaviour. And I'm sure we all agree it's very sad.

In the same way people who've been set free must give up living and thinking like slaves and start behaving as the freed people they truly are.

Outside of Christ, we find ourselves controlled by desires that we do not always like. When we come to Christ, we change our allegiance.

We are no longer involuntary slaves but willing servants, motivated by our desire to serve the God who has saved us in and through Christ.

In verse 13 in the original Greek text, there's a change of tense in the second half of the verse which reflects this dramatic and decisive change of ownership...

"Do not keep on offering any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather once and for all offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself as an instrument of righteousness."

What is Paul talking about in verse 14?

"For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are no longer under the law, but under grace."

Believers in Jesus can offer themselves fully to God because sin no longer has ownership over them. They're free.

But as Brunner, commenting on this has said: "Freedom from the law, doesn't mean freedom from God but freedom for God."

And Paul here, as he consistently does elsewhere, points out it's only by God's grace that we can be set free.

It would be pointless to say to a man or woman, struggling along, convinced of their own ability to maintain perfect obedience to the law. "You will certainly be completely free." They will always be bound by their own efforts to slavishly adhere to the law.

But Christians aren't bound. Christians should know salvation is God's free gift. We aren't depending on our own ability to keep the law. We're freed from the tyranny of sin and law.

But this new rule of grace claims us completely and won't tolerate any compromise with sin. In response to Paul's question in verse 15, the rule of grace, deals with and excludes sin, in a way that trying to obey the law never could.

People often justify themselves by saying: “I’m doing my best” but that isn’t a response a Christian should ever resort to. A Christian knows his or her best isn’t going to get them over the line. The world tolerates sin because it recognizes human frailty and is powerless to eliminate it.

Christians don’t rely on their own strength but on Jesus and while our best is never going to be good enough, Jesus has won our freedom for us. Trusting in his unlimited power to save us means, we don’t need to make excuses for ourselves, or turn a blind eye to our failings. We look to Jesus and keep on looking to Jesus to free us to live in obedience to God. As it says in one translation of Psalm 119, verse 32: “I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free.”

In Matthew 6, verse 24, Jesus tells us: “no man can serve two masters”.

Anyone who has had two or more supposedly part-time jobs at the same time will likely concur with this.

In an echo of Bob Dylan’s song for all of us at the last resort, it is sin or God. It can’t be both.

For Paul the basic assumption is that all are slaves before they become believers in Christ, they aren’t free to do as they will, they are enslaved by sin. While it might seem strange to us that anyone should offer themselves into slavery, we know that this happened. Though most people were forced into slavery, for example after being captured in battle, or born into slavery, some volunteered to become slaves as their only option to stay alive.

And Paul is saying the master whom we obey, shows whose slaves we really are.

Of course obedience is an essential aspect of slavery – slaves do what they’re told and if a slave was sold to a new owner, there was a transfer of obedience from the previous owner to the new one.

So obedience is an important ingredient of living under grace. How we live shows who we are and whom we belong to.

When Paul talks in verse 16 about sin leading to death, he is talking about more than just the physical process of dying. Sin, when it has run its course, leads to the loss of everything that can really be called life. Being slaves to

obedience on the other hand, leads to righteousness. And this is more than just good behaviour.

Commenting on this John Murray wrote: “Paul isn’t distinguishing between the right living that characterizes the servants of God and the consummated righteousness of the new heavens and the new earth.”

Righteousness encompasses the establishing of God’s kingdom, not only in the lives of believers but the bigger picture of God’s reign over his new creation.

So that Paul can give thanks to God that those he’s writing to have wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which they were entrusted. He isn’t saying they have chosen to embrace godliness, rather it’s godliness that’s embraced them.

The teaching they’ve received isn’t just a series of bright ideas thought up by the first followers of Jesus, it is God-given teaching, passed from Jesus through his apostles. This is the teaching that grips people.

We’re told the believers have wholeheartedly obeyed this teaching – there has been a decisive act of obedience when they turned to God. It was a deeply felt experience, sincere which held nothing back.

Verse 18 tells us how the believers have been set free from sin and this is freedom from each and every aspect of sin. We’re free from the condemning power of sin and from its enslaving power. As my old church pastor used to say, we’ve been freed from the root – our sin nature, the fruit – the outworking of this sin nature and the brute of sin – the devil.

Nobody saw the freedom implied in the Gospel as clearly as Saint Paul did, nor gave it such emphasis.

Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 7:21-22...

“Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave.”

In other words, as the scholar Leon Morris comments: “The freedom there is in Christ is so liberating that slavery to men matters little beside it.”

And this is one of the truths we seek to share with the prisoners we visit. You may be a prisoner, stuck behind these high walls and heavy iron gates but you can know perfect freedom in Jesus Christ. He offers you greater freedom than anyone else can give and no one can take that freedom from you, ever. Think how that message of hope transforms the outlook a prisoner, who may have no idea, when, if ever he or she will be released from prison.

And what's true for prisoners inside jails is equally true for prisoners outside them.

But while Paul preaches a Gospel which brings true freedom, he doesn't confuse liberty with license. For him, freedom isn't an invitation to indulge in self-centredness, or to be aimless or purposeless. We aren't freed to wander in a moral vacuum but to become slaves to righteousness.

We're freed to serve.

We no longer live to serve ourselves – we live to serve Christ. It means that in the small decisions of each day, many of which may seem to have no massive moral implications, we are always asking ourselves if we are serving our own purposes or those of Christ, who calls us into his righteousness.

Righteousness is a state in which we exist before God; we are put right with him through Christ. But it is also the nature of the life we live. To be right with God means having the desire to live in ways which please him.

Paul spells it out to the church in Rome, the way he does because he recognizes in human beings a tendency to misunderstand spiritual truths.

He wants to make such spiritual truths clear to them. The Roman Christians had formerly given themselves wholeheartedly to sin. Now it was time for them to give themselves equally wholeheartedly to righteousness. Paul wants to see the lives of the Christians in Rome flourishing in holiness, as they grow in love for and obedience to God, serving Him as their new master.

Verse 20 speaks of the freedom from righteousness, they enjoyed before they followed Christ. As slaves of sin they were under no compulsion to do what was right. But this kind of freedom was grim. Was it really so enjoyable?

Certainly not, according to verse 21.

The New English Bible translates it: “What was the gain? Nothing but what now makes you ashamed.”

Being without shame is a mark of a sin-dominated life – but when people turned to Christ, they came to see sin’s true nature and their past deeds for the shameful things they were. Things that if not arrested would have led to the destruction of all life within them.

Verse 22 finds its echo in another of Paul’s letters. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, he writes:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

The late great Welsh preacher, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: There is no such thing as a Christian who doesn’t bear fruit. You cannot be a Christian without bearing fruit.” He quoted John chapter 15, where Jesus talks about bearing fruit, more fruit and much fruit. The benefit of living in obedience to God results in the fruit of growing in holiness, becoming more like Jesus and sharing eternal life – not just in the future but in the here and now, as an ever-present reality.

Finally, in answer to the dilemma posed by Bob Dylan, I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, as to whether we’re going to serve the devil or the Lord, Paul gives us the options.

In verse 23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Death here is the taking away of a life that is truly life. For what sin does is to rob life of its meaning, purpose and fulfillment.

Sin is the ultimate “bait and switch” scam: sin promises life and gives death. Death is no arbitrary sentence. Sinners get what they’ve earned, death is the inevitable consequence of their sin. Without God’s intervention, there’s a grinding inevitability to the process.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. There’s an infinitely better alternative.

And it doesn’t involve gaining a reward or payment for services rendered or for making merit.

No it's not like that, it's a gift, a free gift – not something like other free gifts, usually things you don't really want or need, that are included in the price. No, this free gift is most definitely worth having. Because God sent Jesus to live as one of us and to die for us on the cross to take away our sins, we can be forgiven and enjoy eternal life in and through him.

That life isn't just endless existence, it's so much more, it's perfect freedom and the life in all its fullness Jesus promised.

You gotta serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Who are we serving?

Let's be sure we know who it is.

Let's be sure it's Jesus who is our Lord.

Let's love and serve him with grateful hearts
for all his grace and mercy towards us.

Let's not keep this good news to ourselves.

God's unmerited, free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus is for all to receive,

So let's live it and share it.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.