

Let's get straight into today's epistle reading.

Here's how it starts: **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.**

I ended last Sunday's sermon

With the first words of today's reading,

Let's go back a bit and remind ourselves

Of what St Paul has been talking about.

St Paul has been talking about the law,

About commandments such as 'Do not covet'

And he has been saying that although the law is good and just and holy

It has counterproductive effects

When it we receive it according to our sinful human nature.

So last week we looked at the human reality of what it means to covet,

Of what it means to desire the good that someone else enjoys:

A nice house car or a pleasant home,

A loving marriage or a supportive circle of friends.

We thought about the problem with coveting:

The problem is not wanting the things themselves,

After all, there's nothing wrong with wanting a loving marriage

Or supportive friends,

Rather the problem is wanting to take away the good

That belongs to another,

To think to yourself, 'Why should they have what I don't have?'

And to attempt to take it from them,

Even just out of envy and spite.

We also talked about the way that hearing the law

'Do not covet' doesn't solve the problem of our sinful human nature,

But can rather enflame the very desires the commandment prohibits.

Now in today's reading St Paul is proclaiming Good News,

And that is, that God can do *for us* what we cannot do ourselves,

That by his Spirit he *fulfills* the law *in us*,

So that rather than simply being trapped by things like envy and spite,

We can show real love, and rejoice in the good of others,

We can help them keep and improve what they have,

And we can ourselves experience peace and joy as gifts from God.

Again, St Paul is proclaiming what *God* can do,

In fact, what God *does* to free us from slavery to sin.

It's worth noting that in this chapter of Romans

There are no imperative verbs:

That is, St Paul is not telling us to *do* anything.

Rather, he is describing to us what *God* has done,

What he is doing, and what he will do.

The first action of God that St Paul proclaims

Is the action of sending his Son to deal with sin

– and to deal with the just condemnation sin brings.

Listen to what he says: **For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

When we consider ourselves in light of God's law,

Then we rightly sense that we deserve the just condemnation

That comes from breaking the law.

We also experience the desire to be free from the power of sin:

After all, it brings no joy or peace

To be trapped by envy or spite.

Now, St Paul is proclaiming that the Father sent His Son

To deal with sin: to take away the condemnation

That comes from having broken the law.

So, we no longer need to be trapped by shame or guilt or fear,

But can instead trust that God is our Father,

And that we can start to think of ourselves as we truly are:

Not as slaves to our flesh – to our sinful human nature,

But as Spirit-filled children of God.

This, in fact, is what St Paul says: **For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.**

St Paul is here contrasting two ways of thinking

That lead to two ways of living.

One way of thinking is based on our native lack of trust in God

-what St Paul calls setting our minds on the things of the flesh-

The other is on the mindset that flows from trusting

That all that the Father has is ours.

This is what St Paul says about the fleshly mindset:

For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

What's going on here? How can we think about it?
Well, let's say we lack the trust that there is a God
Who knows our needs, who deals gently and generously with us,
Let's say we think that when we die we are simply food for worms,
What will this mean for our attitude to other people
When, for example, we see them prosper and enjoy good things?

Well, we will naturally envy them,
We will naturally want to see them taken down a peg or three.
In polite society we might not admit it to others,
But when we consult our own hearts,
Or perhaps when we see human reality portrayed by great artists,
Or read about human nature displaying itself in history,
Then we recognise that there's something in us
That wants to grab the good that others they have,
And, even if we can't get it ourselves,
At least deprive them of what they have.
And if God gives a law that we shouldn't do this,
Such as the law we've been hearing about, 'Do not covet'
Then we will be hostile to it *and to God*:
Why, after all, should we listen to a God
Who does not and will not care for us,
But who only wants to punish us,
And to keep on punishing for us for being who we naturally are,
For being who he has created us?
This is the mindset of the flesh.

But St Paul contrasts this with the way of life that God gives us
As we trust that in Christ Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins,
A cover for our shame, a payment of our debt,
And the hope of the resurrection of the body.
This is what he writes: **But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.**

St Paul acknowledges the reality that in this world
The bodies that we have are taking us to death,
And this is what he has been describing in the last chapter,
But hear how he talks about the hope we have:
In Christ we have a righteousness from God:
We have the assurance from God that we do not need to fear him,
Or to fear that he will fail in his generosity to us.

Think about what this means practically,
Even in relation to the command 'Do not covet.'
As we trust that God, the creator of all there is,
Knows us, even better than we know ourselves,
As we trust that his is the true Father who will ensure
That we have every good we need to live
As true sons and daughters in his household,
As we trust that God will freely give us
More than we could ask for or imagine,
As we, in other words, trust the Gospel
And so live by the Spirit,
Then we experience freedom from envying others,
From coveting what they have.
After all, if God, the creator of all and king of the universe
Knows us and cares for us,
Then the good that others enjoy loses its power
To move us to envy and spite,
And we begin to see that the command 'Do not covet'
Reveals the love of God, and the shape of Christian love,
We begin, by the power of the Spirit
That comes to us through the Gospel,
To experience how God fulfills his law *in us*
By moving us to rejoice in the good that others enjoy,
And to help them keep and improve what they have.
This is the work of God.

St Paul ends today's reading with these words.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

As we will find out as we read through chapter 8 of Romans,
St Paul is not blind to the reality of suffering,
Especially to the suffering of people of faith,
But he proclaims what we confess: the resurrection of the body.
We are not food for worms, but we share in Jesus' resurrection.
In fact, as we trust in the Gospel we experience that the same Spirit
That raised Christ from the dead, is at work in us.
So let's continue to receive God's word,
And have the fruit of His Spirit grow in our lives.
In Jesus' name. Amen.