

ROMANS TALK
“The free gift of God is eternal life”

You must wonder what I’m going to be doing up here? Am I going to do some conjuring tricks, maybe? Or, perhaps, a baking demonstration?

No, I’m going to talk about Romans! Romans – one of the hardest books in the Bible, full of theological concepts and specialist vocabulary. Did you find today’s reading hard? I know I did.

So, whatever qualifies an ordinary member of the congregation like me to tackle this? If I had been doing conjuring I might have managed a simple Mr Marvo trick – but not if Dynamo was in the room; baking I might have got on better with – at least I know what you’re supposed to do, even if the results are somewhat hit and miss, so, again, not if Mary Berry was in the room! But, no, I’m going for the most difficult of the lot, in the presence of theologically trained people who know a lot more than me.....What a nerve!

What does qualify me to make an attempt at this, I think, is the experience I had over 11 years running Mustard Seeds, a Christian club for 9-10 year olds in a primary school in Leeds. I had no qualifications at all for doing this, by the way, having been just a parent with an idea, but school agreed it was a good idea and it seemed that the only person who could carry it out was me. If I didn’t rise to the challenge it wouldn’t happen – so I rose!

It was this that really developed my interest in finding simple ways to illustrate complex things and I found it was something I really enjoyed – and we did tackle some hard stuff, though I don’t think it ever extended as far as Romans!

Someone who wasn’t afraid to tackle Romans, however, was the minister of the URC church I attended at the time, Peter Clarkson, and I really have to pay tribute to his tremendous Bible teaching skills which hugely increased my understanding and which formed a backdrop to all that I and my fellow church member Brenda, went on to do with Mustard Seeds.

So, here goes.....

There are 4 big contrasts which Paul touches upon in the reading we’ve just had and these are:

Slavery and Freedom
Death and Life
Law and Grace
Sin and Righteousness

They are foundational to what Paul is saying and if we don’t understand these concepts I doubt if we have much chance of fathoming what it’s all about. So, I’ve got some illustrations to look at these – not necessarily in that order – in a pictorial way and I hope, by the end, we may be able to come to a simple summary of what we’ve heard.

Sweet dish

This is one of my family heirlooms. It still has a label on the bottom, placed there about 50 years ago, saying "Reserved for Alison" and I did get it, but why on earth did I want it? (*Hold up tarnished, black side of a Victorian sweet dish. It looks nothing*). Well, it was silver, and when it's cleaned up it looks absolutely gorgeous (*turn it over to reveal shiny side*). I came from a family where there was quite a lot of silver and there used to be a fortnightly cleaning ritual which kept it looking pretty nice. I'm afraid that's lapsed in my house and I had a hard job cleaning the front up, but what a contrast! That's my illustration of Sin (which is really going our own way) and Righteousness (which is going God's way). We look pretty unattractive with our outer layer of sin, but inside we are made in the image of God and we can all be made clean again and shine as silver, because of God's salvation. More on this at the end.....

The sin that covers us with black tarnish and hides our beauty also takes away our freedom and ties us up in knots, as if we were slaves.

Hand illustration

Here's a very simple illustration of that. Stuart's going to be a volunteer here.....and I'm going to bind his hand up in masking tape, which we'll label "Sin". Now let's ask Stuart to shake hands.....He can't.....or to raise his open palms to praise God.....He can't. There are still some things he can do – I suppose he could knock at a door, and he could have a fight and knock someone out but the positive things he can do are very limited.

This picture also illustrates death and life, because not only can Stuart not do much with this hand, but being clenched up like this is likely to stop the circulation and that, together with it being unused, will cause it to wither and become useless. Use it or lose it!

Now, let's release it, and have a handshake..... Now Stuart has the choice between knocking people out in anger, bringing death, or using it to touch people with healing and love, bringing life. But the tape remains on the back of his hand to remind us that, whilst we're on this earth, the tendency to sin is always there.

Just desserts

What allows us to escape from sin is grace. Basically, grace is something freely given, that you can't earn for yourself. In everyday life we use the expression "a period of grace", meaning you've got a designated length of time to put things right during which you won't be punished, but after that woe betide you! If you go wrong again you'll get what you deserve. This is what living by the law, as opposed to grace, means – obey the rules and you'll be fine; break them and you'll cop it!

Here's something a bit more pictorial to illustrate it:

"When a person works an 8-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time that is a wage (*show money bag*). When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his

performance that is a prize (*show medal*). When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements that is an award (*show Stuart's Xerox award*). But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and merits no award **and yet receives such a gift anyway** that is a good picture of God's undeserved favour. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God".

Colours

Finally, does anyone remember that old riddle "What is black and white, and red all over?"? (*Answer – a newspaper*). Well, we can use those 3 colours in a different and very simple way to summarise what Jesus has done for us:

Black sheet of paper – our sinful state.

Cover it over with

Red sheet of paper – Jesus's blood shed on the Cross

Cover it over with

White sheet of paper – Jesus has paid the price to allow us a new start

So, gathering all these ideas together, what Paul is saying is.....By God's grace (free gift) we have been saved from sin. We can now choose whether to carry on with our old ways and live as a slave to sin, which, as we've seen, ties us up, disables us and controls us just as a slave is controlled by his master, or we can choose to follow God's way which allows us to live freely and in fullness of life. Paul actually uses the rather shocking idea that we have to be slaves to God, but this is merely to emphasise that we must accept Him as our master. Doing so is entirely our own choice.

I expect we'd all prefer the second way but the trouble is there's a catch. We don't stay squeaky clean like the white sheet of paper. That's a potential, a possibility, and every time we truly say sorry for what we do, we have a way back to being white again. But, living in this world, we're like the sweet dish which gets tarnished by the atmosphere, and we get tarnished by our own wrong desires and decisions and by the atmosphere and influence of the world around us.

Just as the silver cleaning has to be done over and over again to preserve that lovely shiny finish, so must we go on trying to follow God's ways, picking ourselves up when we fall, trying to get back to the straight and narrow, praying and saying sorry, over and over again.

Silver cleaning's **hard** and the Christian life's hard too! But there is hope. Through Jesus, freedom defeats slavery, grace defeats the law, righteousness defeats sin, and life has already won, once and for all, against death. As a member of my old congregation in Leeds used to regularly cry out in the service, "Hallelujah!"