

SERMON – 6/9/26

Romans 13:8-14

“The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”
(Romans 13:11)

The best part of 50 years ago I came across a prayer in a little book of 365 prayers that belonged to my grandfather. It was written by Augustine of Hippo, one of the great men of the early Christian centuries, who owed his conversion to the passage from Romans 13 that we have read today. Despite a Christian upbringing, Augustine had rebelled in his youth and had lived a party lifestyle, fathering several children by a number of different women and leaving all kinds of wreckage in his wake. But one day, he heard someone saying 'Take up and read' and the verses we read earlier are what he read. The Holy Spirit applied the message to his heart and he returned to the Lord, putting aside what Paul here calls the 'deeds of darkness' and instead 'clothed himself with the Lord Jesus Christ.' Latent in every reading from Holy Scripture is the power to change lives and to change the world until by the gracious touch of the Spirit, God's grace is unleashed. I want to begin this morning by inviting you to join me in praying Augustine's prayer:

“O Thou holy and unspeakable, Thou wonderful and mighty God, whose power and wisdom hath no end, before whom all powers tremble, at whose glance the heavens and the earth flee away, Thou art Love, Thou art my Father, and I will love and worship Thee for ever and ever! Thou hast deigned to show pity on me, and a ray from Thy light hath shone upon mine inward eye. Guide me on into the perfect light, that it may illumine me wholly and that all darkness may flee away. Let the holy flame of Thy love so burn in my heart that it be made pure, and I may see Thee, O God, for it is the pure in heart who see Thee. Thou has set me free; Thou hast drawn me to Thee; therefore forsake me not, but keep me always in Thy grace. Guide me, and rule me, and perfect me for Thy Kingdom, for the sake of Jesus Christ Thy Son. Amen.”

In the closing chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul has turned his attention to the practical working out of the Good News about Jesus Christ that he has expounded in the first part of the Letter. He has called those of us who have accepted the message and have put their trust in Christ to be no longer confirmed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds; to play our part in the life of the Church, the Body of Christ, by exercising the gifts we have each been given; and to overcome evil with good wherever we can. In the first part of chapter 13 he has spoken about how the Gospel has an impact in the realm of worldly government and the role we have as Christians in the secular sphere; but in what we have read this morning Paul focuses on one of the great themes of the Christian faith – that is love – thinking of our living in love as the repayment of the debt we owe to the One who loved us so much He gave us His only Son; as a fulfilment of the Old Testament love whose greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour; and in the light of the fact that our days are all numbered and that our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

If I might be excused another quotation from Augustine, presumably inspired by this same passage, he once summed up the Christian faith in this short phrase: 'Love and do what you like.' Now that may seem to you to be completely inadequate as a Christian ethic, but if we take on board what Augustine must have learned and what people in every generation have discovered that true love is not to be found in self-gratification or the pursuit of animal passion, and if we give the proper force to the word 'love' as Paul describes it in the famous words of 1 Corinthians 13 (love which is patient and kind, which is not self-seeking and keeps no record of wrongs) – if we give it *that* force, then we say that by loving and doing what we like, we are actually fulfilling the greatest commandments of the Old and New Testaments.

By nature, like animals, our instinct is just to survive no matter what that may mean for those around us and so we tend to look after Number One before giving any thought to others. The great step that constitutes the heart of the Christian faith and that is

prompted in us when we comprehend what it is that God has done for us in Christ, comes when we trust that God will give us life in all its fulness if we will only entrust ourselves entirely to His care, heart and soul and mind and strength. If we love God with a perfect love of heart and soul and mind and strength, then all we choose to do will be within God's will. If we love one another with a perfect love, doing for our neighbour what we would wish them to do for us, then we will naturally want the very best for each other and everything we do will be geared towards that end.

Let me unpack that a little bit in the light of what we have read today.

First of all, the apostle prompts us to turn our gaze upon the Cross. Having just been speaking about paying taxes and giving honour and respect to those in authority in the world, he writes: "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another." (v.8) He describes Christian love in terms of the repaying of a debt because Jesus says: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) In the words of contemporary hymn-writer Graham Kendrick, 'Such love, pure as the whitest snow, such love weeps for the shame I know, such love paying the debt I owe, O Jesus, such love.' Christ has paid the debt we could never clear – He has paid the price of sin and has ransomed us, redeemed us and in so doing He has left us (albeit aided by the Holy Spirit dwelling within us) with the continuing debt to love one another as He has loved us.

Secondly, Paul teaches us how to relate that to a parallel strand in Scripture that describes the calling of the child of God to honour the Father in the keeping of His commandments. Paul has spent a great deal of time earlier in the letter showing how salvation cannot be *earned* by keeping the Law of Moses but he never dismisses the value of the Law in drawing people towards God and helping us to recognise our need of a Saviour. Paul writes: "The commandments – do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and whatever other commandment there may be – are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilment of the Law." (v.9-10)

People sometimes criticise Christians for being too negative. All some folk seem to hear of the Gospel message is the cry 'Thou shalt not...' but here Paul turns that completely on its head.

"Love is the fulfilment of the Law." If love is your focus, inspired by the sacrifice of Christ for you on the Cross that we celebrate here at the Table this morning, and empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in your life and whom we come to draw upon here this morning, then you won't be committing adultery, you won't be committing murder, you won't be stealing, you won't be coveting – for these things are a denial of love. There is no more positive way to live out our lives – no more emphasis merely on what Thou shalt not, rather 'Love and do what you like' as a reflection of Christ Himself.

Because, finally, Paul encourages us to recognise our place in the outworking of God's eternal purposes. "Understand the present time, he writes. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light." (v.11-12) This is the motivation to love that draws us on into the future that God is preparing for us and that one day He will bring suddenly and gloriously to fulfilment as He inaugurates His perfect Kingdom of justice and joy.

My friends, leave behind you all that belongs to this world and that will assuredly return to the dust from which it came; put off the fleeting pleasures of the physical realm in favour of the eternal bliss that is the promise of the everlasting God; and hold up this vision before you day by day, moment by moment – the call to love God and love your neighbour that has echoed down the ages since the days of Moses, the call to reflect the lived example of the Son of God expressed for us supremely at Calvary, the call to step out of the darkness into His marvellous light, the call to clothe yourself with Christ and to live life here and now as one who is already a citizen of heaven.

In other words, in Augustine's words: 'Love and do what you like.'

Prayer

Such love, pure as the whitest snow, such love weeps for the

shame I know, such love, paying the debt I owe, O Jesus, such love.

Such love, stilling my restlessness, such love, filling my emptiness, such love, showing me holiness, O Jesus, such love.

Such love springs from eternity, such love, streaming through history, such love, fountain of life to me, O Jesus, such love.