

26 March 2023, Fifth Sunday in Lent, Romans 8:6-11, Pastor Fraser Pearce

Let's get straight into the text.

St Paul starts today's reading with these words: **To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.**

This can sound a little unexpected:

It sounds like St Paul is saying that the body is bad,

And only the spirit is good,

But we Christians believe that God made everything

Including the human body, and that he declared all that he had made,

Including us, human beings, to be 'good'.

On top of this, we Christians celebrate the incarnation,

That the Son of God became *flesh* and dwelt among us.

So what could St Paul be talking about?

Is he saying that the human body is bad,

And that we should try to escape our human bodies

To become spirits? What's going on?

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word,

And that is, that God has given us his Holy Spirit,

Who dwells in us, so that our bodies, created good by God,

Although experiencing death because of sin,

Do and will share in the resurrection of the body

First experienced by our Lord Jesus Christ.

This means that, even now, we have the freedom to live

As hopeful flesh and blood human beings here and now.

OK. Let's return to what St Paul said: **To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.**

When St Paul talks about the flesh,

He is not talking about the human body,

But about the type of life that flows from thinking

That bodily existence, circumscribed by death, is all there is.

This can sound a little abstract,

So today I'll hand on one of Jesus' parables,

A story told by Jesus that shows us the fleshly mindset at work.

It's the parable of the rich fool,

And it comes from Luke 12. Listen: **‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”**

OK. The man receives through the land an abundant crop.

What is his thought process? What does he plan?

Well, he thinks only of himself,

And not his responsibilities to God and other people,

And he acts as if his life is his own to determine.

He sees many years ahead of him before death,

And he thinks these years are simply there

For his own bodily pleasure and relaxation.

This, I think, is what St Paul would call a fleshly mindset.

The problem is not that the man is an embodied human being –

That’s a gift from God –

The problem is that he lives as if his bodily existence is all that there is.

You may remember how Jesus’ parable ends: **But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”**

This fleshly mindset is folly, and it leads to death.

Jesus, as he concludes the parable,

Wakes us up to the reality of the spiritual realm. He says: **So it is with those**

who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’ Luke 12

OK. If you can get the mindset of the rich fool in the parable,

I think you’ll find it easier to get a handle on what St Paul is saying,

Listen to how he goes on: **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.**

Think of the rich fool: let’s say he heard Jesus’ teaching

That one can’t serve both God and possessions,

That you’ll end up hating one and serving the other.

He would be hostile to this teaching:

He would not want to hear it, and if he did hear it,

He’d find it naïve at best, and downright harmful in practice.

Even if, by some chance, he decided to take the teaching on board,
He'd find that he couldn't do it: That he'd in fact serve money and possessions.

That's how it is with all of us by nature.

We don't naturally trust God, and so we are naturally hostile
To any law that God proposes to us.

And as long as we are in this fleshly mindset,
Then even things that appear wholly godly,
Such as prayer and almsgiving and fasting,
Can be done in a fleshly way.

Remember at the beginning of Lent

When we hear Jesus' teaching on these devotional practices?

If we do them just to receive the approval of other people,
Then we show what St Paul would call a fleshly mindset at work:
We pray or fast or give alms so that others will think well of us,
So that they will trust us, and tell others how good we are,
How sincere, how trustworthy. But, as Jesus says,
If we do even devotional practices in this way,
Then there's no reward from the Father in heaven.

Now although we are by nature fleshly people,

We, who have been baptised into Christ,

And who have had God declare us righteous,

We, who trust not in our own sincerity or goodness or trustworthiness,
But in the grace of God in Christ Jesus,

We, who have received the Spirit of God through the Gospel,

We have a new way of life freely given to us by God.

Listen to what St Paul goes on to say: **But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.**

It's not that we cease our bodily existence, of course:

In fact St Paul will soon make clear that our bodies

Will share in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

St Paul is saying that we are no longer constrained

To think and speak and act as if we are simply food for worms.

We can see that God is at work in us,

That we have a future with God

That frees us to think outside ourselves as we show love for others.

St Paul says: **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.**

When St Pauls says **if Christ is in you**, he's not introducing doubt:

The meaning is: if Christ is in you, and he is...

It's like me saying, 'If we are Australians, then let's use our right to vote wisely'.

It's drawing the right conclusion from the present reality.

So: St Paul acknowledges the reality that our bodies

Are indeed headed toward death: We are all sons and daughters of Adam,

But the death that we will experience is not the end of our existence:

God is calling is through death into a new life

In which we will not leave our bodies behind

To become spirits or angels, but where we will, like our Lord Jesus,

Live the fulness of our humanity in the resurrected order.

This is what St Paul says: **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.**

Again, this 'if' here is not introducing doubt:

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead

Does dwell in us, so that we can be sure

That he will give life to our mortal bodies:

That even if we feel as dry as a valley of bones,

The Spirit will stand us on our feet, give us flesh and blood,

And breathe into us the breath of life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Each one of us have been made in the image of God,

We have bodies that are the gift of God,

And, by the grace of God in Christ Jesus,

These bodies will share in the resurrection of Jesus.

So, we no longer need to live thinking

That death is our final destination,

Rather we are free to live in the freedom of the children of God,

Trusting that God is our loving heavenly Father,

And so showing love for each other,

So that God's name may be glorified among us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.