

In Romans 1 Paul calls himself a bondservant or slave of Christ. It is an interesting term and concept. Why does he do this and what can we learn from it?

We have been reflecting over the last few weeks on both how we can become more resilient in our Christian walk and having seen how God worked in the lives of Abraham and Sarah to further His mission in the world and to grow their faith. This morning we come to one of the more challenging aspects of the Christian walk: God's call to completely hand over our lives to Him. For some, maybe for all of us, this is not so easily accepted and put into practice. In New Zealand, "I did it my way...", is almost a national anthem. We are fiercely independent and proud of it ... for better or worse. The mentality borne of generations living at the end of the world having to cope, irrespective of the rest of the world, or even in spite of it, has had no greater depiction than over the last few months. The reality, and few in the world can say it, is that New Zealand can be almost completely self-contained and sufficient if necessary. All of the basics of life and a great many other things can be produced here in New Zealand with no outside help. We can easily feed and cloth ourselves and generally look after ourselves and woe to anyone who would try to take that away. God never takes away without giving more and when it comes to our lives, He challenges us to surrender ourselves completely to Him. The whole of our lives. The apostle Paul exemplifies this calling himself a "slave of Christ", in fact it seems to be one of Paul's favourite self-appellations. It says a lot and this morning we will see where this thinking sits in our theological understanding of the development of personal faith.

The downsides of a fierce independence are not so great: pride, lack of care, self-actualisation at the expense of others, particularly family, an insatiable drive for more, of everything, parochialism and all that goes with it, even violence and increasing inequality, haves and have nots. Sadly, we see the results of this all too clearly and often in our communities, homes, broken families, relationships, people. There is a very real cost. The call of God is for a voluntary surrender of our whole lives to Him. When considering the frequent alternative surely God will only make life better.

As we continue to examine Abraham's life, we find that Abraham has come to a place in life, in his walk with God, where it is necessary for God to challenge Abraham to his core as to whether or not God is really first in Abraham's life? It is an exciting and very real challenge for us to truly put God first and see the love and blessing He brings into our lives as well as the challenges. It is all too easy to slip into seeing the blessing itself as the thing being sought rather than the relationship. That's the fallacy of prosperity gospels. We don't seek God for material reward. We seek Him so we can honour and worship the Creator and enjoy the relationship He offers us. Otherwise it's like being in a relationship where the events being shared, the trips, outings, adventures themselves become more important than the relationship. When this happens, the relationship can break down and even become destructive. If you have watched some of the TV programmes where couples race each other around the globe you will have seen something of this. When the relationship doesn't come first, even the best of things around it can go wrong. We won't even start on marriages that have floundered because the relationship has been lost in the busyness and challenges of life.

Abraham had come to love the dream and the promise. He would become the father of a great nation, multitudes of people, and have a legacy forever. He was trusting God for this but had increasingly put everything into his son Isaac at the expense of God. Given Abraham's age, ending his first century, one might see this as hardly surprising. In the reading from Genesis today we have one of the oddest, harshest and most surreal events in Scripture. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, to kill and burn him as an offering. There is little point trying to sugar-coat it with the wisdom of hindsight, saying that God never intended the child to

be killed. This would be to negate the impact of what Abraham was asked to do and what Abraham had to wrestle with. How could he do such a thing to his only legitimate child, his heir, the promise of his legacy? Abraham did not know that God intended to actually save the boy. What was God asking him to give up? Everything... and to trust God completely.

The practice of human sacrifice may well have been known to Abraham. Abraham's father Terah had been involved in the manufacture of pagan Canaanite idols. Recent research and *"analyses of the bones of sacrificial victims at Ur also revealed that their bodies were heated and exposed to mercury vapor after death. This was probably done to keep them from decomposing so they could be kept on display in a public setting. The bodies of some were adorned with copper helmets and gold jewellery, and they may have been arranged in a tableau, suggesting that they were dressed in elaborate costumes and posed as participants in a feast"*.¹ Later, in Moses time, we hear God's view through the Law from Deuteronomy 12:31 we read, **"You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."** In Abraham's time however this Word and the Law had not been given. For Abraham the command of God was not unthinkable as a charge of the Living God but incomprehensible in terms of his expectations and the promises he had received. What to do?

Genesis makes it very clear that this was a very personal encounter between God and Abraham and Abraham doesn't hesitate regardless of his feelings. The very next morning he heads out to do what God requires of him. We might note Abraham isn't brave enough, or maybe silly enough, to tell Sarah or Isaac what he is about to do. But what was Abraham thinking?

In Hebrews 11:17-19 we find the following text, **"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."** It appears that Abraham was very good at discerning the voice of God and responding in faith. After all he had left his family and home at Ur to follow the call of God. He also trusted in the word of God and anticipated that Isaac would be the father of many. Therefore, logic dictated that if God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac then Isaac would have to be physically resurrected thereafter. Interestingly in the Hebrew context and text in Genesis when Abraham genuinely offered Isaac and prepared him for sacrifice he had completed what God required of him and his heart was proven, as it were. While somewhat unremarkable in English there is a subtle wordplay around the bindings that held Isaac in Hebrew that speaks of the completeness of the work. A parallel with Jesus binding for crucifixion one might note. In having given over his son so completely and immediately Abraham had demonstrated his complete faithfulness to God and willingness to hand over even the most precious thing he had, in the world, to God, in faith that God would work it all out. It is little wonder then that when Jesus explains the resurrection and eternal life, in Mark 12:27, to the Sadducees He speaks of God as **"the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob ... who is not the God of the dead, but of the living"**.

Some two thousand years after Abraham the apostle Paul sees the same level of adherence to faith for himself as intrinsic to being a follower of Jesus, a Christian. In Romans 6 Paul uses the imagery of slavery as a stepping stone to understand the development of faith. It is helpful here for us to have some understanding of the Pauline development because taking the text at face value is both justifiable and accurate but loses in the bigger picture if that's all it is.

Before we do this though a word on the slavery that Paul understood. In the Roman world over 80% of the Roman Empire at that time was comprised of slaves. In that time race had nothing to do with it as slaves included prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates,

¹ <https://www.knowablemagazine.org/article/society/2018/unearthing-secrets-human-sacrifice>

peoples from outside the various Roman territories and the children of desperate Roman citizens who sold their children in order to live. Slaves generally had few or no rights and only the higher class slave in Rome would have had any recourse to aid under these limited rights anyway. Consequently, slaves were totally beholden to their owners, even for their lives. For many life was brutal, harsh, full of mistreatment and abuse. But not for all. Some did very well running their masters estates, affairs, and business. At one point some slaves became so like their masters the Senate decreed they should wear different clothes so masters and slaves could be told apart! Some slaves were able to win, earn or buy their freedom. This was called "*manumission*", something generally unknown in more modern race-based slavery. A good slave was a valuable, trusted and vital asset to be materially cared for and looked after. Many, it seems, especially those born to it, did not want "freedom" which meant a loss of security, position and status. But for all of this, a slave needed to be devoted to their master and was at the bidding of the master at all times.

For Paul then, to call himself a slave of Christ, the best possible of Masters, was to depict a relationship of faithful service and duty to one who held his very life in his hands. But it also depicts a master who truly loves and cares for his servant and looks to reward and encourage.

Paul makes us of this imagery powerfully. It would have spoken more stridently, at face value, to his contemporaries than it does to us today yet his message is just as critical. Everybody he says, serves somebody. I wonder if Bob Dylan got his song from here. I'm sure Paul would approve of Dylan's lyrics. One verse says "*You may be a construction worker working on a home, You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome, You might own guns and you might even own tanks, You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks, But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes, 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*". You get the gist. We all serve somebody but ultimately it is either God or not God. In Paul's terms we are slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness.

Paul then develops the logic ... sin leads to death, physical and spiritual, a breaking of the relationship with God. In contrast righteousness leads to life, in this world and the next and a growing relationship with God. But even more than this, whereas death is a full-stop, righteousness leads into sonship, being adopted into the family of God. The slave becomes a son, a daughter. In the Roman Empire, when a son was adopted they had full rights of a naturally-born child, as if they had been born to the parent and the world treated them as such.

What we have then in Paul's depiction of being a slave of God is a depiction of the process of sanctification, of being made holy, of coming into the fullness of relationship we can have with God. Just as Jesus called His disciples and would later call them friends, so too, God calls us to serve Him so that in doing so we can walk into the fullness of relationship we are intended to have as heirs with Christ. In Pauline terms we start as Adam, fleshly beings and end as brother and sisters of Jesus, spiritual beings in eternity. The walk of faith is a process, a journey, and like the apostle Paul we come to know that the joy of the relationship with Jesus is worth giving up our everything and in doing so we gain everything. So we don't walk by sight we walk by faith and in doing so we see God.

Amen

