

Sermon for Proper 9A

Text: Romans 7: 15-25a

"Life wasn't meant to be easy but..."

Our former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser is always portrayed as a dour and humourless person. People used to compare his face to one of those great big stone carvings on Easter Island. In recent decades Mr Fraser rehabilitated his public image. He was seen as a respected statesman and an advocate for social justice and the rights of refugees. But despite all of this, Mr. Fraser will be remembered for a statement which wasn't his own, but which is generally ascribed to him: "**Life wasn't meant to be easy...**"

Some of us would remember the mid to late 1970's. It seemed a grey time after the colour and action of the previous Whitlam years. But Australia needed a time of restraint and belt tightening after the wild ride of the previous government. And Fraser's words still seem apt today.

Life presents us with many challenges. Things are simply very tough for a lot of people. The mortgage must be paid, the children have to be educated, the weekly budget has to be balanced. Someone we love is sick; there are tensions within the family unit. We come to feel that somehow this is all we deserve or can expect in life. We respond with a tone of resignation, a shrug of the shoulders.

But it's not only external situations with which we have to wrestle. Stuff inside each one of us can be just as difficult to resolve. It might be an ongoing struggle with poor self-esteem, the feeling that we just don't measure up to what other people, or indeed God, expect of us; annoyance with our lack of willpower to stop doing things which we know harm us physically or spiritually, anything from eating the wrong things or drinking too much through to secretly indulging a pet sin and loathing ourselves for it. It feels like there's a war going on inside, and we are powerless to stop it.

This is where life isn't easy, and it's here that Paul addresses us today. He, too, is aware of this inner conflict. "**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.**"

So was Mr Fraser right after all? Life, my life, my inner life was not meant to be easy. Well, that's not the whole truth, but it's certainly our experience of life under the burden of sin. Christian psychologist and Lutheran pastor, Dr. David Ludwig notes that God has created us with two powerful internal forces, the mind and the body. Both are good, but because sin is part of our human equation, these forces become unbalanced. Each fights the other for supremacy.

The mind is the part of us that always wants to be right. It tells us what we should do and is harsh on us when we don't meet its expectations. Paul speaks of the **'law of my mind.'** I'm sure you've listened closely to the internal conversations that your mind engages in, cruelly judging you for some wrong action. Then there's the body; it's the part of us that wants to satisfy our desires and impulses. It's the 'want-to' part of our personality, urging us to do what feels good to us. Paul speaks about the **'law that wages war against the law of my mind.'** ¹

The problem Paul experiences in himself, is that these two laws are at war with one another. **"For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"**

There's a civil war going on inside each one of us. Paul calls it the 'law of sin.' And **wretched** is a most appropriate word to describe the condition. As the internal conflict rages, we find no peace. Stress, pain and heartache are the result. David Ludwig explains it this way: **'Whenever the organising principle of God's love is taken out of the equation, and because of original sin, the mind becomes cruel, not caring about the needs of the body in its relentless drive to do the right thing. The body becomes rebellious, not caring about what is right.'** The "law of sin" is the bad relationship that develops between these two forces, which stresses us, causes us to despair or makes us try harder and harder to do the right thing, but setting ourselves up for failure.

"Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Paul cries out. Who will put an end to the swing from guilt to giving up, and back again? Who will enable me to get my thinking sorted out so that I don't constantly persecute myself with negative thoughts and self-criticism? Who will rescue me from falling prey to every little whim and impulse? On our own, our heart is not strong enough to bring these two forces to heel, or to balance them. We are dealing with spiritual forces beyond our capabilities. Avoiding the issue, blaming others, burying ourselves in activity so that the pain doesn't get through are only short-term fixes.

'Life wasn't meant to be easy...' Malcolm Fraser claims that his use of this quote has consistently been misunderstood. He didn't mean it as a gloomy explanation of life's difficulties, but rather it was a reason to take on difficult challenges.

The original quote comes from the pen of the playwright George Bernard Shaw who wrote: **"Life is not meant to be easy, my child; but take courage: it can be delightful."**

The same thing can be said about the inner conflicts that we all suffer, and which scar and shape us. For those who trust in Christ there is a new and dawning reality, a delightful truth that changes their lives. **"Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord."**

It's Jesus who brings the balance of the new creation into our inner and outer life. He has won the victory over sin and death, and he shares with us the benefits of this victory. Christ is present in us, in the heart, to use Dr. Ludwig's language. It's this new heart which is the centre of our being. It's the heart, strengthened by Christ, that enables us to bring balance to the forces of mind and body that threaten to pull us apart.

Hear Jesus' words to you today as an invitation to enter again into that heart space: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** Come to me, all of you who are tired of doing it under your own steam, tired of the way your mind accuses you, tired of the way your body seems to dictate your behaviour. Jesus has lifted the burden of sin from us. He has taken it on himself. And day after day he continues to forgive and comfort us, and to set us on the right track again.

How do we live in that space where our heart is strengthened? There are simple spiritual exercises that replenish our spiritual heart. David Ludwig suggests the following exercise which you might like to follow or adapt:

1. Read from the Bible, just before you go to bed.
2. Once in bed, take a deep breath, and with the sign of the cross, speak the words: 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' to remind you of your baptism."
3. Remember the words "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" as you take another deep breath.
4. As you exhale, breathe the prayer "Abba, Father" or "Father, my Father."
5. Feel your heart warmed by the realisation that you a part of God's family.
6. Take five more slow deep breaths and repeat this process each time. Then go to sleep with a word of praise on your lips.
7. Repeat this process when you wake up.

"Life was not meant to be easy, my child; but take courage: it can be delightful." The delight is the constant presence of Jesus himself, standing by us, lifting us up when we fall, giving us the resources to attain balance in our lives. He is gentle with us in our weakness. He picks up our burden and lets us stand up straight. He puts his hand on our shoulders and offers his guidance. He gives us the Holy Spirit to provide strength and power to obey him. And we've got the ultimate hope that one day we'll be rid of this tension in our lives, when we'll see Jesus face to face.

Life wasn't mean to be easy, but it can be delightful, in Christ. Amen.