**Scripture Base:**         Romans 7.21 to 8.6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Now I don’t know about you but I love this time of the year as it gives me the chance to indulge my passion for watching sport.   This last week or so has been great fun because of Wimbledon where we have all been swept away in Henmania and as a golfer, I’ve only a couple of weeks to wait for the Open Golf to start.

Now watching Wimbledon always fills me with renewed enthusiasm to burrow into the rubbish tip that we call a garage, search feverishly for my racket, blow the cobwebs off it and get onto a tennis court and get some value for the tennis club subs that I dutifully pay each year.   This year, I’ve gone mad and put my name down for the village tennis ladder, which should really expose my weaknesses.

And as I watch the Henman’s and Sampras’s playing at Wimbledon I become increasingly convinced that this is, after all, a pretty simple game and I know that I can put all my learning to good effect as soon as I get onto the court.   All those wonderful delicate drop shots, those powerful topspin forehands, they’re all in there just waiting to be put into effect at the end of my racquet.

The sad part is, of course, that when it comes to it, nothing ever really works out too well.   Suddenly, my legs never seem to get me into the perfect position to execute that wonderfully thought through shot and I revert back to my good old fashioned slogging which bears as much resemblance to Tim Henman as Frank Bruno.

The problem with golf is even worse as for me, this is my abiding passion.   Not only do I have the benefit of watching the top players at the Open Championship, I can also go out and buy a thousand books and videos all of which claim to have the secret of perfect golf.    I haven’t succumbed to the videos but I have got my fair share of well thumbed books.   As if that wasn’t bad enough, I can never resist buying a golf magazine at least once a month and they always contain another mass of useful hints and tips.

By the time I get to the first tee on a Saturday morning, my mind is filled with good advice and good intentions.   I can envisage the perfect drive with the ball coming off the face of  the club and disappearing like an arrow into the far distance.    I am thinking about the latest article that I have just read and tiring to remember the 15 tips  for a perfect swing and the thing that I forget to think about is hitting the ball.    As a result, my perfect 250 yard arrow like drive is converted into a 50 yard fluff skipping across the grass at a height of about an inch and disappearing into a particularly dense thorn bush never to be seen again.

I’m sure you’ve all experienced something familiar where your body just doesn’t seem to want to do what it’s told - a problem that sadly seems to get worse with age.    It brings to mind the old adage “The mind was willing but the flesh was weak” which takes us to Paul’s letter to the Roman’s and today’s New Testament reading.

When we think about the apostles, we always tend to think of Paul as being pretty well perfect in every way - almost a spiritual role model for us.   We never seem to think of Paul with all his wisdom and spirituality as ever having doubts about his faith or grappling with his conscience.  We can easily imagine Peter in that position - we know he had his bad sides.   Remembering his denials of Christ, his flaring temper, it would be easy to imagine Peter grappling with his conscience - but Paul - surely not.

And yet here - in these 7th and 8th chapters of his letter to Rome, Paul exposes all his concerns and weaknesses for us all to see.    He admits his human failings and frailty to us when he says “When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.   In my inner being, I delight in God’s law but I see another law at work in my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of sin.”   He goes on. “What a wretched man I am!   Who will rescue me from this body of death”.   He finishes chapter 7 by saying  “In my mind, I am a slave to God’s law but in my sinful nature, a slave to the law of sin”.

Now this is quite an eye-opener for us.  Paul admitting to the same human weaknesses that plague us all and then admitting that he doesn’t have the answer to this problem of our sinful nature.   Rather he is intent on making us understand the enormity of the problem and getting us to recognise that the anguish that this imperfect situation creates is our minds is perfectly acceptable.  We should feel bad about falling short of God’s laws.    We should feel helpless and weak and shameful.  Paul does - so why shouldn’t we.

Paul goes on to debate why this should be so.   Why it is a necessary part of our journey of faith to wake up and realise that we are hopeless and weak followers of God’s law - always failing and always falling short.    He says that the law is not the problem - he is the problem.   And he is the problem because he, like us all, is made of human flesh - descended from Adam and tainted with the stain of Adam’s sin.  By nature, our natural fleshy nature, we are hostile to God and friendly to sin.    Sin gives us instant gratification and reward and it is a constant battle for us to resist the temptation to sin.

If we accept this premise that Paul puts to us, that we are inherently sinful and that we are destined to a life of despair over our inability to resist the temptation to sin because of our weak fleshy nature, then we should accept that the sort of despair that Paul expresses in this passage from Romans (remember - “What a wretched man I am!   Who will rescue me from this body of death”) that this sort of despair is not only an accepted and normal part of our Christian life but that it should be regarded as an essential part of our Christian life.

Unless we accept this sort of despair over our hopeless ability to do good then we will never truly seek out the solution to this problem.   We will go through our Christian walk actually believing that we are better than we really are.   That we are in some ways quite godly and holy and spiritual.   We end up walking, like the Pharisees, with our noses in the air looking down on the miserable sinners who beat their breasts and recognise their condition in God’s eyes.

The problem with many Christians is not that they are sinners - we are all sinners, it is that they lack any despair over this sinful state.    Now why should this be?   Well, let me suggest a few reasons why we blunder through life thinking we are wonderful when in fact we are breaking God’s law at every turn.

Firstly, we get very good at re-labelling sins to convert them into virtues.   We might tear someone apart with a critical comment that cuts them to the core and justify this to ourselves as being cruel to be kind.   Aggressive and self assertive behaviour by committed Christians can be conveniently re-labelled as zeal for the Lord.

Secondly, we are very good at teaching people to ‘cope’ with their sin.   Paul never teaches Christians to cope.   We say to Christians that they need to learn to live with the agony of falling short of God’s laws.   Paul says “No you don’t, you need to have that agony so intense that you can’t live with it so that you are forced to find the true answer to your problem’

And thirdly, we try to convert our socially unacceptable sins to those sins which are socially acceptable.   We know that robbery and murder are unacceptable in our society and so we redirect our sinful energies into areas that serve our own self-interest, but in ways which bring us the commendation of others rather than their condemnation.   We give up those sins that might get us put in prison and take up those sins that might make us prime minister.

So, all in all, we find lots of ways of living with our sin rather than facing up to the reality of it and allowing that to do for us what it did for Paul - namely to make him feel terrible.  To make him realise that he was human, sinful, weak and feeble.   To make him realise that there was nothing he could do to help himself out of that quandary and finally, through that despair to realise that there is an answer.   There is a way out but it is not through our human endeavour.

In chapter 8, Paul gives us the answer to this quandary, this complex problem.    Sin is complicated but the solution is simple.  We don’t have to understand sin in order to solve it but we do need to accept that it is there - that we are in need of forgiveness.

The solution to sin is not in understanding it.  The solution to sin is found in the cross of Calvary and Jesus’ sacrifice for us.   It is found in the teachings of God’s word and in accepting his Spirit into our lives.   We need to look no further and simply accept that which God has provided for us.

So how great is your struggle?   How great is mine?   If our struggle was as great as Paul’s then in desperation we would give up our reliance on self help and inevitably turn to the cross.   The very spirit that raised Christ from the dead is the spirit that dwells in you and in me and will give true life to our mortal bodies.   God has the solution to the seemingly insoluble problem of how we cope with our human weakness.

The solution for Christians is to learn to walk in the Spirit of God, to trust Him implicitly and not to trust our own efforts.   But we will never get to that point until we have come to the desperation of Paul in Romans and recognise that while our spirit may be willing our flesh will always be weak.   The only answer for us is to trust not in our flesh or our spirit but in the spirit of God.

Let us pray

Dear Lord, we pray that we may begin to grasp the immensity of our struggle with Sin.    May you help us each to acknowledge that our flesh is weak.   We pray that we will feel something of the desperation of Paul and through that turn to you and your saving Spirit.   We ask this in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.   Amen.

**Tom Crotty**