

SUNDAY 11 October 2026 Prison Sunday (Trinity 19)

Romans 3.21-31

Luke 7. 36-50

ALL ARE BROKEN

In an earlier life, when I was doing work and being paid for it, I used to attend a nearby City of London church where I served as Churchwarden for 20 years. During that period there were both joyful and turbulent times, partly owing to the fact that for eight years there was really no officially appointed priest-in-charge. The most challenging time of all was when our administrator was found to have defrauded the church by over £ 20,000. On my retirement as Churchwarden, at the AGM, the new priest-in-charge addressed me with just seven words: “Thank you for all you have done” and plonked a bottle of port in a plastic bag in front of me. We then moved on to the election of a new Churchwarden.

For some considerable time afterwards I was disappointed and resentful that I hadn’t been thanked more profusely for having done an at times extremely challenging job, which included being named in the Church Times and interviewed by the then Bishop of London in connection with the fraud mentioned just now. In other words I was pre-occupied with my own position and pride. Months later I heard that the priest-in-charge’s daughter, who had gone to Hong Kong to work, was living with a gangster by whom she was expecting a child. Her parents were distraught. As soon as I heard this, I can remember feeling extremely ashamed at my earlier reaction and pre-occupation with myself. I needed to ask God for some serious forgiveness.

I’ve called the theme of this sermon “All Are Broken”. We are called and we are all trying to respond to God’s call, but we are called also because sometimes we are broken in our response. This is the dichotomy of our

human condition – God calls us to reach out beyond ourselves to him and to our neighbour, but we are always falling short and it can be very painful. We human beings are good on guilt but very bad at overcoming it.

Yet there is no cause for despair: our two readings today provide great encouragement by reminding us of the reason for the arrival of Jesus Christ in our midst.

Paul's letter to the Romans is not only the longest of his letters, but also the one in which he sets out his theology of grace and contrasts it with a theology of salvation by works, which he has inherited from his Jewish origins. The Jews had over the centuries been led by their religious leaders to believe that all they had to do for salvation and forgiveness of their sins was to obey the Ten Commandments of course but also to abide by the more than 600 other rules and stipulations which had been added, affecting every aspect of their lives – from the food they ate, the clothing they wore, their treatment of sinners, to annual sacrifices of animals and birds in the Temple at certain festivals. In other words the Jewish faith at that time had become distorted into a “tick the boxes” exercise, from which the spirit of the Jewish Law had been excluded, leaving only the letter of it.

In this passage from Romans Paul is describing how the situation has fundamentally changed with the coming of Jesus. His death on the cross has been put forward by God as a sacrifice of atonement for all our sins, and is effective through faith. As Paul says, all have sinned and therefore fallen short of the glory of God for which we all strive. But if we believe in Jesus Christ, and the revolution brought about by his death and resurrection, we find that God's grace is available to us a gift, without our having to have worked for it. Paul is at pains to point out that he is seeking to uphold the Law, not ignore it – and Jesus himself says that he has come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it i.e. to re-ignite the spirit of love which was God's original intention – and later on in Romans Paul says

it is not too late for the Jews to recognise what has happened in their midst. The irony is that the Christian Church has become a Gentile i.e. a non-Jewish religion.

Turning now to our Gospel reading from Luke, we see how obedience to the letter of the Law has affected a Pharisee called Simon. Jesus has been invited to eat with Simon, and a woman has heard about it and determines to see Jesus and to honour him. This story is one of the few to be recorded in all four Gospels, although some of the details differ. Luke is the only one to describe the woman as a “sinner” (thought to be Mary Magdalene). While she is busy anointing Jesus (a sign of great honour) Simon is busy thinking that if Jesus were a prophet he would know she is a sinner and would not allow her to touch him. Jesus, being no ordinary human being, knows what Simon is thinking and tells him the parable of the two debtors, one with a large debt and the other with a small one. Jesus of course does know that the woman’s sins are many, and because of who he is he knows in what frame of mind and heart she has approached him. It is love for him and what she has seen him say and do that give her the courage to do what she does for him, and so her sins are forgiven.

Today is the start of Prisons Week, and there is a display at the back of church. Locking people up because they have committed a crime seems to be a standard treatment throughout the world, which in the case of dangerous criminals is very understandable. But what happens in prison is crucial not just to our international reputation but also to our standing with God. I recently read a comment from Thomas Jefferson (and quoted later by Mahatma Gandhi) which is: “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” Those who find themselves in prison are indeed vulnerable in a whole variety of ways and need help. Restorative Justice is one of the tools prisons have, with the help of local Christians, and psychological and educational assistance are

another. Keeping prisoners locked up until they die is in my view not one of them.

The parable of the two debtors is addressed to Simon the Pharisee. He is broken. It is a condemnation of his judgemental attitude and of his lack of openness and love, and so it speaks to all of us too. Simon shows himself to be unable to respond to Jesus and to his message of the gracious approach of God. Like many of us Simon feels no great need for help, but is content and comfortable with the position he has reached. We might say that, compared with the woman, he needs to be forgiven little, but it is that little need that has caused him to miss out on Jesus's message.

The example of Simon, and more importantly of the woman, demonstrates that we are indeed all broken. But it also shows that God has provided us with the means to put ourselves together again, thanks to the gift of faith in his son.

Amen PBW – 9.10.2026