

Let us pray: Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of our hearts and give us correct faith, certain hope, and perfect love, so that we may always and in all things act according to Your Holy Will. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

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Well, what a light + cheerful set of readings we have today, don't we? I mean: nothing like walking right into the middle of one of the biggest taboos we have as a society, and getting right in and amongst it.

I don't know how many of you watched the film 'Gladiator' when it came out 25 years ago. It had a few memorable quotes scattered around its script along the theme of a life well lived, but the one that these readings bring to mind for me is when Maximus Decimus Meridius, the Roman General at the heart of the film, says this:

"death smiles on us all: all a man can do is to smile back."

As the famous truism expressed by Benjamin Franklin in a letter of 1789 goes, *"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."* As John Donne put it, *"Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes."* Or, in the words of Mitch Albom, *"Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently."*

As we near the end of our journey with Christ to His Passion, + begin to prepare ourselves for the fast-approaching events of Holy Week, we are challenged again to consider the heart of our faith, which calls us to look up + hear + respond to the words of life that call to us from the tomb of Gethsemane that is, in our journey towards the Cross, *currently*

empty, but will soon hold the body of our crucified Lord Jesus. As Paul reminds us from his first letter to the Corinthians, "*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*"

And it is with that in mind that I'd like us to spend a few minutes considering our reading from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome. Forgive me if I start by unpacking a few key words that Paul used multiple times in this passage, because these words are key to us understanding his message, and therefore our hope for the future.

The first word, the Greek word *phronema*, talks of our mind set + our focus to set our heart on something – whether important or frivolous. And, if we're honest, there are times in our lives we set our minds on things that really are not important. The word has a

visceral sense to it. Some English translators used the word 'governed' to capture the essence of what Paul meant. As a ship's engineer I would associate this most readily with the governor, or regulator, of a ship's generator. The generator would produce electricity for the ship, + the governor's function is to maintain the speed of the engine across its load range. This is really important, because if the governor fails – and it sometimes would - it would knock the voltage off-range + potentially damage equipment or even cause the ship to lose power completely.

Another more human example would be in Royal Navy usage, where for a number of years until recently the *Regulator's* Dept was responsible for enforcing Navy regulations + carrying out investigations where they may

have been breached – they were the Navy’s Police.

In Paul’s usage of the word *phronema*, he is referring **both** to the degree that a person has self-control or not, + how and towards what that self-control is motivated. This is distinct and very different from the more commonly-used Greek word for the mind, the *nous*, + which refers to our intellect, our understanding, + our awareness, which is to describe our God-given capacity to think, to reason + to discern spiritual things, such as Paul uses in Romans 12.

Our 2nd word is ‘sarx’, translated *flesh*. In the New Testament, *sarx* is used over 150 times + carries layered meanings. While it *literally* refers to the flesh of the physical body, in Biblical usage it represents our fallen human nature in its sinful tendencies -

especially when contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit. Paul writes in Gal. 5:17 that ‘*the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit*’ - contrasting the tension between human desires + spiritual goals. Or, in Jesus’ words, “*the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*”.

The next word to mention in our text is death: however, there are actually 2 words Paul used in this passage: the first, which is used just the once, is *thanatos* which, in Strong’s Concordance of Greek words, is described as the reality of separation from the life + salvation of God forever, by dying without first experiencing *death-to-self* so as to then receive God’s gift of salvation freely offered to us in Jesus Christ.

The remaining references in our text use a different word, *necros*, which describes something as being *devoid* of life. In biblical

contexts, it refers both to physical + to spiritual death, such as being 'dead in trespasses + sins', as Paul also described in Ephesians, highlighting a person's state of separation from life-giving influences.

The fourth word to draw out is *pneumatōs*, which is to describe the action of the Wind or Breath of the Spirit of God, and the theme of being infilled and sealed by the Spirit of God.

And our fifth word is *zōē*, the Greek word for life. In Greek there are 3 words that could be used for life, depending on context: *zōē*, *bios* + *psyche*. *Bios* refers simply to biological life, with no consideration of anything further beyond the act of breathing, eating and subsisting. *Psyche* refers to the life of the soul as distinct from the physical body, + represents each person's personality and individuality. It is more commonly associated

today with mental well-being, with *psychological* well-being and *psychiatric* health. I remember a lecture as a student nurse where the point was made that – irrespective of all of the challenges of physical ill-health - there can be no health without good mental health.

In contrast with both these terms, *Zōē* refers to the vitality of a life lived in union with its creator, inspired – literally in-breathed – *inspired* by the Spirit of God: a life filled with vibrancy, with purpose, + expressing the fruit of God's Spirit.

So: let's start putting it all together. Let me illustrate with a story: One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside all of us.

He said, "My son, the battle is between two "wolves" inside us all. One is Evil: it is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, guilt, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good: it is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee's reply? "**The one you feed.**"

At the heart of it, Paul's message to the believers in Rome is simple: you'll invest your life, your time, your energy in what you *choose* to prioritise. If the Spirit of God is in you, she will incline you toward the things of God + what God prioritises.

Some of you will probably have come across something called *the Golden Circle*, which is a term some smart corporate type came up with, to describe how an organisation should structure and prioritise its purpose or focus. Picture a 3-ring bullseye: the centre is named *why*; next out is *how*, and the outside ring is named *what*. When a company gets its vision + its priorities in the right order, it makes it more likely that it will be effective in reaching its goals. When it doesn't – + its scary how often organisations (or even governments, like I'd say we have an example of the "*shoot first, and whatever you hit, call it the target*" approach in the news just now) it's scary how often some organisations don't get these priorities in the right order - the end result is much more likely to end up in mission drift+failure. So: *what is the right order?* Put simply, you've

got to start with the 'why'. **Why** are we doing what we're doing? Once we've got the '**why**' right, we can then start looking at the '**how**', and set the foundations right to then finally start thinking about the '**what**'.

So: what is our why? It's because we have heard the message that God loves us and has poured His grace on us in the life + death of our Lord Jesus, because He wants us to live in relationship with Him, + we want to live our lives in a way that brings a smile to His face out of our love + gratitude toward Him.

That's it. It is no more complicated than that. God loves us + we want to love Him back: we want to know Him more, + want others to know Him too because He told us that's what He wants for them too.

That's our **why**.

And when we look at our passage from Romans 8 in that light, it inspires us to then see the way forward to achieve the **how**, in the way in which we prioritise our lives + our life choices. And that, in turn, informs + influences our what: what we do with our time, with our resources, with our energy.

If you want to know what you value, let me invite you to consider what you do with your time each day – the most precious commodity each of us is entrusted with. And then consider if that represents what you truly value.

May God's Spirit help us to use our time + efforts + energies + resources wisely, and to consider again **how** we set our priorities, and **why** we do what we do. And may she help us to love Him more and more, out of our realisation of how much we are loved by Him. Amen.