

The first sign of madness, it has countless times been said, is talking to yourself. This, if you think about it is a curious statement. If the proverbial wisdom ran something along the lines of 'the first sign of madness is stuffing your hand in your waistcoat and declaring you're just popping off to Waterloo, and this time you're going to win', few would argue. If the first sign of madness was held to be receiving very important but secret messages for the attention of the CIA from extra-terrestrials, or perhaps declaring that 'we are a grandmother': well these are unusual enough occurrences to, at least merit a trip to the GP and a check that you are still taking the tablets. But talking to yourself? Everybody talks to themselves, so unless the whole world is mad- and of course that view has many and eloquent adherents- unless the whole world is mad, this little folk aphorism is barking up the wrong tree. Everybody talks to themselves.

Now if I said that not just people but things sometimes talk to themselves you might decide that the pressures of the parish share and the shenanigans of synod have finally done their worst and I have gone so close to the edge that I have slipped over and the finely woven tapestry of my sanity is unravelling at an unstoppable speed. But not perhaps if I clarify and say I don't think that when I'm not in the kitchen it's full of the chatter of crockery planning my downfall but what I mean is that sometimes Scripture talks to itself. Open those crinkly-brittle pages and sometimes it's talking straight to you, sometimes it's talking to someone else in far off generations and different worlds- and sometimes Scripture can be found, apparently worse for wear, quietly muttering to itself.

The writings of our New Testament are constantly talking back to their predecessors of the Old Testament, as the people of God continued to chew over the fat of the faith. The New Testament even chitters away to itself: there is much of that specialist talking-to-yourself which is called preaching, but also such chatter as we might find in the letter of St James, irritably snapping at the presumption of some of St Paul's ideas or that fascinating murmuring in the second letter of St Peter warning about the impenetrable nature of some of St Paul's letters. *'There are some things in them hard to understand,'* St Peter says *'which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.'*

Mutter, mutter, mutter.

One of the tragedies of the human condition is that we do not easily learn from other people's mistakes: this is one of the reasons why history has the depressing tendency to repeat itself, and Britain has the depressing tendency to have Conservative governments. We spend our lives thinking it won't happen to us, while unnoticed it is, until eventually, undeniably, it does. And so, despite the clear warnings of St Peter about the snares of St Paul awaiting the unwary, we continue to rush into St Paul's letters, ignoring the path littered with previous foolhardy casualties, assuming that those apostolic words must be no more difficult for us to get the gist

of than, say, a letter from the Reader's Digest telling us we have won a fabulous prize, or a missive from the bank telling us we're going to be charged again.

I raise this issue of caution- biblically sanctioned caution no less- about Paul because our New Testament readings for several weeks done and to come spring from the most difficult, the densest, the most problematic of all of St Paul's letters. Even if we chose to ignore it today, it will keep coming back, so perhaps it's best to face it now. It is the letter that lit the fuse of Augustine's brilliant, burning heart; the letter that launched the sullen gunship of the Protestant Reformation; the letter that led Karl Barth to see with piercing clarity that the long march of progress of liberal Protestantism was just so much circling in a cul-de-sac: the letter of St Paul to the Romans.

A particular danger of reading St Paul's letters is that it can be rather like trying to see through a car windscreen in the middle of a thunderstorm: for the brief moment when the wipers swing the vision is clear: then almost immediately it is obscured by the torrents; then clear, then obscured, clear / obscure, clear / obscure. The selection of Romans we were treated today is no exception, although possibly the wipers are even more rubbish than usual.

St Paul starts by telling us

*God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*

Eugh. If this were a classroom, it would be one of those moments when the teacher would say 'Good point Paul. I'm glad you raised it. Who wants to say something about that?'

But then: Swish!

*Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

OK! Well at least it's straightforward, compare and contrast, we understand division, flesh and spirit one against the other...

Swish! off he goes again

*For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law— indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

Huh? I mean it's a bit difficult *not* to be in the flesh; it, sort of comes with the being a living animal territory.

Graphically illustrated is the problem of Paul, Paul the Obscure, Paul the suddenly hard to understand. What on earth, we may ask, is he on about now? And... this is one of the more straightforward parts of Romans.

Well I for one, don't propose to try to answer that question. Instead, let me say, is it perhaps, and I'm certain that this is not the commonest of comparisons, that the letter to the Romans is like music? Can we only understand it as a whole?

If we just listen to the second violin part have we heard all the Jupiter symphony? Well, no. We need all the other parts before we can even start to hear what the music can convey. If we hear only the fanfare at the start of the Wedding March have we heard the whole piece? Of course not, we have heard only the attention-grabbing *premiere coup d'archet*: if we want to know what the piece is all about we need to listen on. And do we need to hear the whole piece rather than the Classic FM highlights? Yes. Have we really experienced Handel's Messiah if we sit through the Hallelujah chorus? Of course not.

Now this is not to argue against the lectionary habit of giving us small selections of Bible books at each sitting: I don't think the cause of understanding would have been greatly served if we had sat through a reading of the whole of the Epistle to Romans today: probably quite the opposite. But we do need to be aware that the notes we hear sounded one week will only truly make sense if we hear them in relation to the notes of previous and future weeks; as the rhythm of the readings unfolds we need to remember that they are part of one much larger symphony of Scripture.

If we realise that in Paul's letters we often meet the complexity we would normally find in music we might find that we are then, unexpectedly, able to pick out the melodies with much greater ease: we may find we can comfortably hum the tune of Romans, if not necessarily all the cadenzas. One of the main tunes, one we heard in our reading today, is this: without Christ, we are slaves to sin, quite simply because we are bounded by the limits of our flesh. These limits are quite proper to creatures with bodies. Of itself our bodily nature is not bad: quite the opposite- God saw all that He had made and it was good. But it does become a problem, a real ball-and-chain problem, if we cannot realise that we are *more* than the sum of the needs and desires of our bodies. All bodies need heads, and for us, that head is Christ.

It is, according to Paul, not quite that we have been imprisoned by the flesh, we meet Christ, and then the doors of the prison burst open and out we rush free. Rather, perhaps, imagine ourselves living all our lives in one room. And then somebody opens the door. That's baptism. The walls of our room are still there, we still need somewhere to live: the room still needs to be swept, dusted, tidied, kept warm. But with Christ we know that our futures are no longer bounded by those four walls, there is a wider, bigger world. The resurrection world. The door is opened, and we can for the first time see the horizon. Our world is much bigger: it is no longer only this room; just as our life in Christ is more than this body and the Law.

So let us step back far enough that we can listen to the music of St Paul's letter to the Romans, that most astonishing hymn to the freedom of the Children of God. Music, after all, is the language of heaven.