

Epistle (Romans 5:1-10)

In today's Epistle, Romans 5:1-10, verses 3-4 give the Christian "take" on the trials and troubles every person experiences. St. Paul says that "*we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*" Now, that word "character" isn't one we hear much these days. There's lots of emphasis on "rights," especially "my rights," and on being free to do whatever one likes. But there's little-to-no emphasis on how what we do with that freedom shapes who we are, who we become.

"Character," you see, is the pattern of an individual's personality and behaviour; "character" is how someone's put together morally. One wag defined "character" as "what you do in the dark when you think no one's watching;" and that's not far wrong! How a person deals with the circumstances of life speaks volumes about the values they hold and about the relationship they want to have with other people and with God. And while tough times do not necessarily make character, they do reveal it, because adversity in our lives is always really a crossroads where a person chooses one path or the other, usually character or compromise. As we see in the Gospels, Jesus is the ultimate example of proven character: of consistently choosing what's right over what's easy. In Matthew 4:1-10, for example, we see our Lord's character in how He handles those three temptations. He rejects the temptation of turn stones into bread, to use His power self-indulgently; He rejects the temptation to take a swan-dive from the top of the temple, to achieve fame and "success" by doing something spectacular rather than by going to the Cross; He rejects the temptation to fall down and worship the devil, to compromise His faith and moral principles in order to gain some earthly advantage. His character exhibits a perfect fidelity to God and to the Word of God. And the point is not just that Jesus had a good character, but also that every time we choose character over comfort or convenience, we grow more into the image of Christ.

However, there are four things we need to know in order to grasp accurately what character actually is. Firstly, character is more than talk. Anyone can say that they have integrity, but action is the true indicator of a person's character. James 2:18 slices through the feel-good baloney of our age: "*Someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*" In other words, no one can demonstrate faith unless and until they put it into action; otherwise, it's just blather. Proverbs 20:11 says that "*Even a child is known by his deeds, whether what he does is pure and right;*" even the character of a child can be known by the way he acts Our character determines what choices we make, what we do; and what we do displays our character. Someone once humorously but wisely put it this way: "Your walk talks and your talk talks; but your walk talks louder than your talk talks."

Secondly, while talent is a gift, character is a choice. There are a lot of things in our life over which we have no control. We don't get to pick our parents, our genetics, our upbringing, our talents and abilities, our intelligence. Much as I wish it otherwise, I'll never be a decent pianist; I don't have the talent or the fingers for it. But we do choose our character. In fact, we ourselves create our character by every choice we make. At Saturday Vespers we sing Psalm 1:1, which is a lesson on how not to form our character: "*Blesséd is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.*" Now think about that progression of "walk...stand...sit;" it's a series of choices a person makes which creates their character. It starts with "walking in the counsel of the ungodly," hanging out with the wrong crowd; it progresses to "standing in the path of sinners," joining in their bad behaviour; and it ends with "sitting in the seat of the scornful," buying into their sinful way of

life and making it one's own. That's why, in 1 Corinthians 15:33, St. Paul warns, "*Do not be deceived: bad company corrupts good morals.*" We dare not go through life with brain in neutral, just going along with the crowd, but have to actually use our brains to think about the choices we're making day by day and how those choices are shaping our character. Whether we've had a good start in life, a good upbringing, or a bad one, as long as we've got free will and a functioning brain, we get to choose what kind of person we're going to be. Deuteronomy 30:19 lays it on the line for each and all of us: "*I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you,*" says Moses, "*that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.*" So our constant question needs to be, "What am I choosing right now: the easy way or the right way? And what will this choice make me into?"

Thirdly, character is essential to our Christian purpose. Whenever somebody starts talking about every Christian's call and responsibility to be a witness to Christ, to go and make disciples, many of us get pretty uncomfortable in the face of our often-unasked and frequently-unanswered question "How?" Well, there's something called "lifestyle evangelism;" it's basically sharing the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ first by example, by action, and by especially relationships, and only then by words. We humans do not trust and will not listen even to good advice from those who have perceptibly flawed characters. It's good character that opens up doors for lasting relationships with those around us; and it's those relationships, in which we are seen for who we really are, that plant questions in the minds of those around us. "What does she have that I don't have?" "His life seems to be falling apart around him, but he seems at peace. Why?" "He never seems to have a problem admitting when he's wrong or letting it go when he is wronged. How come?" Luke 2:52 links the way Jesus "*increased in wisdom and stature*" with an increase "*in favour with God and men.*" It was His good character which gained Jesus a hearing from those He came to save.

Fourthly, by God's grace, people can rise above and beyond the limitations of their natural character. Have you ever noticed the difference in the apostle Peter before and after Pentecost? We see in Matthew 26:69-74 how before Peter is filled with the life and power of the Holy Spirit, he's a mess, quivering in fear before a serving girl who says "*You also were with Jesus of Galilee;*" he was so scared "*he began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the Man!'*" By his natural character, Peter's just not very brave. Fast forward to after Pentecost when several times this same Peter stands up to the high priest and all the Sanhedrin, refuses to keep silent about the risen Jesus and insists "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.*" By God's grace this cowardly lion finally rises up and roars. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 6:9 states baldly that "*the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God,*" and then by way of example lists various kinds of big-time sinners. But in verse 10, the Apostle says, "*And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*"

How does such change happen? Well, obviously God does the heavy lifting; only the Holy Spirit can transform us by renewing our minds. But we do have to cooperate with divine grace. First, we have to search for the cracks in the foundation of our life. And that means taking a brutally honest and hard look at every aspect of our life: our relationship with God, our spouse, our children, our peers, our employer, our co-workers, our neighbours and friends. Identify the short-cuts we're trying to take and the resulting short-comings in our life and relationships. Then write them down, and start praying daily about each one,

asking for God's direction and grace to achieve positive change. Second, look for patterns, examining our response to this search. What patterns of weakness do we see? Do I see a pattern of telling lies to get out of trouble; or of "liberating" stuff from work; or of being harsh on others but easy on myself? These and things like them are definitely character issues. And we need to ask God to deliver us from these patterns of behaviour and to engage in prayer and fasting to become open channels of God's transforming grace...which means, of course, that we have to actually want to change. Third, face the music. The beginning of character repair is when we face our flaws, and repent of them [change our basic attitude about them, so that we really want them gone from our life], confess them, and continue to deal with them. Repentance and being accountable to someone in our problem areas (which is partly what Confession is about) are always key to positive change. And lastly, rebuild. Don't stop with facing up to bad choice; but by God's grace start making new choices to do what it's our part to do in building a new character and creating a new future.

As all *Doctor Who* fans know, the Doctor's time-traveling machine, the Tardis, is inexplicably "bigger on the inside than it is on the outside." Well, that's what having a truly godly character is: being bigger on the inside. How big are you and I letting God's Spirit make us on the inside today?