

Owe no one anything, except to love one another (Romans 13 v 8, 6th September 1950)

Why, I ask, 'owe no one anything?' Why does Paul tell us to settle all our debts, except that debt, which is the sacred duty to love each other?

When is an important time to settle our debts? Does anyone have any suggestions?

I want to settle my debts before I die, both my financial debts and my debts in relationships. I desire deeply to leave this world without enemies. This is not as easy as it sounds. Perhaps most of us have bad memories even towards people who themselves are already dead, parents, brothers and sisters. I have a friend whose mother died last year, and she only found out months after she died, because she and her mother did not speak to each other. It was doubly sad because she tried to reconcile with her, but her mother refused.

But Paul is not talking about death. Quite the opposite. He believes that a wonderful new world has begun that we who belong to Jesus belong to the new creation, the world refreshed and transformed and made glorious. You manifestly do not belong to this world if you still nurse resentments, if you do not daily forgive, if you do not daily seek forgiveness. But this is not easy. Sometimes I think the church goes on too much about forgiveness. Who do we think we are when we tell people who have been traumatised by others, when we tell them that they ought to forgive? A priest lost her daughter in the London bus bombing in 2005. She resigned her orders because she could not forgive the bombers. I really admire her for her resignation. In my last parish there was a new Christian who was raped at a party. She told me that the man raped her as if she was the last crisp that he was finishing up from a crisp packet while doing the clearing up. Her route towards confirmation was slowed down because she knew she could not forgive the man. And who were we to tell her that she must.

Let me return to financial debt. My first monthly pay packet as a young teacher in 1973 was £80. It was all I needed. It payed for my accommodation, my food and clothing, and left enough for modest entertainment. I had no debts. How would that have been today? What do students end up owing? And at what age are people freed from their mortgage. I entered on adulthood as a free person. If only that were the case for today's 22-year olds.

We are enslaved to all sorts of things from financial worries, to bad relationships, bad memories, to fears and addictions and mental health problems. But when we meet someone who is truly free, we recognise it for what it is. Our jealousy may want us to destroy them, or, we may want to draw close to them so that we become like them. But any taste of inner freedom surely teaches us that that is what we want.

Let me tell another reason for settling our debts. Because, until we settle our debts, we cannot set out on the journey to the new place which is our destiny. Because we are going to have to leave quickly. No time for elaborate packing. We are the Jews leaving the slavery of Egypt at night, with no time for elaborate packing; we are the exiles returning home from Babylon; the prodigal son returning from slavery to our father's house. We have got to travel light.

I have a serious and unanswerable question for the people of St Mary's. When God call us to set out on our journey, how are we all going to get that organ into our rucksacks? By which I mean, is the organ going to tie us down, or is it going to bless us and make us more generous and freer? It could go either way.

A new world is beginning, a journey is starting. Paul tells us that 'now is the time to wake out of sleep, for salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. So, we must lay aside our debts, which are drunkenness and debauchery, quarrelling and jealousy'.

When our children were small their behaviour at home, and to one another, was often appalling. And we used to exhaust ourselves telling them off, specially for bickering. And shouting at them did not improve their behaviour one iota. What did change their behaviour was hope fostered by love. Hope that they were not just stuck in the mire of childhood, but that something new and unknown and good was approaching them.

The thing about the new world, God's new world, is that it is both about to come and it has already come at the same time. You fall in love. You have not yet kissed you lover but the new has come. You land a good new job. In you mind it has already arrived. You discover you are pregnant; the world has already changed.

I feel terribly sorry for people at those stages of life where nothing is happening. Where things that do not excite you just go on and on. The condition of so many people. The condition of all of us at certain times. For this reason, we so need a real spirituality, a real relationship with God, on not being dependant on our outward life going well. How will we survive the dark times?

The church is a community of hope, a school of hope. It is because the good news has already arrived that we strain to greet it in the future, and it is because of the joy of this loving liberty that we are so keen to throw of our debts of resentment and bitterness.