What difference does it make to our lives to be a follower of Jesus Christ? What is distinctive about the Christian life? When we invite others into a relationship with God through Christ, what exactly is it that we are offering them?

These are really important questions as we begin to consider together what it means for us to be a Mission-Shaped Church. Because at the heart of our movement towards Mission must surely be an understanding of what it is we are inviting people into. If we don’t know what difference the Christian life makes, then we won’t be able to engage with mission appropriately. Instead, we will be a church that offers good social events, nice friendships and a space for people to come and meet with their friends, either on a Sunday or throughout the week.

Of course, friendship and deepening relationships are important and these sustain us as Christians but the Christian life is more than that and the message we are to offer the wider community of Enfield must be deeper than that too.

I this passage we have heard read from Paul’s letter to the church in Roman, we hit the very heart of what it means to be a Christian and the defining feature of the Christian life. The idea of the old self dying and us being born into a new life in Christ. So let’s unpack this passage in some more detail and see what Paul has to say about this idea. If you want to follow it with me, you’ll find it on page 166 in the pew Bibles.

The first thing to say, is that we are joining Paul halfway through a conversation. In the first 5 chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul has been laying theological foundations about the nature of God’s grace and who Jesus Christ is to the world and how forgiveness has been won through his sacrifice on the cross. Chapter 6 marks a new section in his letter as he begins to develop his thinking and outlining the practical implication of God’s grace for each one of us.

And that’s why he begins with this slightly strange question in verse 1: “What, then, are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”

Over the last few chapters, Paul has been outlining the immensity of God’s grace and the sheer depth of his forgiveness and love. And so he now raises this question, which may have been in the mind of some of his hearers and to be honest, reflects an attitude that we all hold to some extent. The attitude is this: that we sit very lightly to the things we do wrong because, in the back of our minds, we know that God is going to forgive us, isn’t he? So we might think, “Well, I know I shouldn’t really be doing this but God’s going to forgive me, so it will be OK…” Of course, none of us would ever actually say that - but it does go on a little bit in our minds doesn’t it?

And here, Paul names the elephant in the room: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” Is it OK to live like that?

Not surprisingly, Paul is having none of it and straightaway in verse 2, he says, “By no means!” But interestingly, the reason he gives for us not to behave like that isn’t a sort of moral argument: he doesn’t say that it is just a bad attitude to have…Instead, he gives a deeply theological reason for why, in reality, it is actually impossible to carry on living with that attitude if we are walking faithfully with Jesus.

In verse 2, he asks the rhetorical question: “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” Now this seems an odd thing to say because all of us continue to sin, all of us continue to get things wrong, don’t we? So what is Paul talking about?

Well, in Paul’s letters he sometimes uses the word ‘sin’ to mean different things. Sometimes, he uses that word to describe the actual things we do wrong: actions, thoughts, words that are dishonouring to God and others. But sometimes, he uses the word ‘sin’ to mean something else. Sometimes he uses it to mean a sort of spiritual power that controls us and controls our eternal destiny. And it is this second usage of the word that Paul is meaning here: “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

What he means is that, when we give our life to God and we begin to live in the grace of the Father, then sin no longer has any more ultimate power over us. Yes, we continue to get things wrong - but the Good News is that this no longer determines our ultimate destiny. The power of God in our lives is greater than the power of sin. We have died to the power of sin and we are now living to God.

A transaction has occurred. Once, we were dead to God and living under the power of sin but now we are dead to the power of sin and living under the power of God. There has been a reversal of our fortunes; a reversal of our destiny and way of living. And the more we meditate on that, and the more we allow that to become a reality in our lives, the more ridiculous the idea in verse 1 becomes: we no longer want to treat God’s grace like some cheap commodity and continue to do things wrong, knowing that we will be forgiven. Because that sort of an attitude is a cheapening of the relationship we have with God.

We wouldn’t behave like that with other people, would we? I wouldn’t say, “Well, I know that if I do this, it will really upset Jo but, hey, she’ll forgive me, so I’ll get away with it in the long term…” That would be no basis for a happy marriage, so why should it be the basis for our relationship with God? It just can’t work like that…

A transaction has occurred; the reality of our lives is different now that we are living as Christians. We have left one age behind and we have entered a new age. By definition, Christians are dead to sin: the old has gone, the new has come.

And how has that transaction occurred? How has the old life died and the new life arisen in us? Quite simply, through our union with Christ Jesus and what he has done for us on the cross. As Paul goes on to say in verses 3 & 4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

There’s the transaction in practice. We have become united to Christ and his death becomes our death and his new life becomes our new life. It is nothing we have earned ourselves or achieved ourselves: Jesus has done it for us. If we unite ourselves to him, then his death becomes ours and his resurrection life becomes ours too and so, like Jesus Christ, we can live in the presence of the Father for all eternity. That is the grace of God at work in our lives.

So does that mean that becoming a Christian is just about securing a place in heaven? That it only has to do with our eternal destiny after death? No, absolutely not! Look how Paul phrases this in verse 4: “We too might walk in newness of life”. We are to walk in our new life, which means that living in the grace of God should absolutely impact how we live out our everyday lives. The more we rely on the grace of God in our lives, rather than trying to live in our strength, the more we will reflect the love, kindness and compassion of Jesus in our daily interactions with other people. We will become Christlike as people, as Paul says in verse 5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”.

The resurrection life isn’t just something that will happen to us on the Last Day when Jesus returns in judgement. The resurrection life is what you and I walk in every moment of our lives here on earth, in the here and now…As Paul writes elsewhere, in 2 Corinthians 4:10, “We are always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies”. In our daily lives, we carry in our bodies both the death and resurrection of Jesus: the old has gone and the new has come and so our moral conduct changes accordingly.

And so Paul goes on in verse 6: “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” Now this is a really important verse, and the key word is ‘body’: the body of sin. Like with the word ‘sin’, there are two different meanings to the word ‘body’ when Paul uses it in his letters. The first meaning is the ‘physical body’: the hair, bones, skin, and flesh we are made of. The second meaning is the one that Paul uses here, which is who we are as social beings in relation to the world and to other people.

So when Paul says that the body of sin is destroyed, he means that, as Christians, we have a new way of relating to the world and a new way of relating to other people. Fundamentally, the old has gone and the new has come. And the result is that we now relate to the world differently, we relate to one another differently, we relate to the community of Enfield differently. As he goes on to say in verses 7 & 8: “For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

So what does it mean for us to ‘live with Christ’ in relation to our social context; our world, the wider community and other people? It means that we must always be governed by the same principles that governed Jesus Christ’s interaction with his own social context. Like Christ, we are to be motivated by kindness. Like Christ, we are to be motivated by hospitality and the welcome of others. Like Christ, above all, we are to be motivated by love and compassion. As individuals and as a church corporately, the body of sin has been destroyed and we live with Christ and so we are to be known as a people, as a community living out the likeness of Christ in all our social interactions; kindness, hospitality, compassion and love.

It is these qualities that are at the heart of us becoming a mission-shaped church together because these are the qualities that hallmark the new life we share in Christ. As Paul says in verse 8: “But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him”.

Have we died with Christ? Have we died with Christ as individuals? Have we died with Christ as a Christian community? If we have, then the old has gone and the new has come. And if that is true of us, then we shall surely live with Christ, showing kindness and hospitality and compassion and love to everyone with whom we have contact in whatever way. That is the mission of God to us and that is the life of mission to which we are called as individuals and as a community of Christians

And once we truly grasp that, once we truly grasp the truth of the mission-shaped life to which we are called, there will be no turning back for us just as there was no turning back for the resurrected Christ. As Paul writes in verses 9 & 10: “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God”.

There is no turning back for Jesus Christ: he died and was raised to new life and he cannot go back into death again. Likewise, we as a community at St Andrew’s have died with Christ and we have been raised to new life with him and there is no going back…

We are to move forward together, to walk in our new life together and pursue the mission that God has for us. And in the final verse of our reading, verse 11, Paul urges each one of us to grasp that reality and begin living in it. He says, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”.

Over the coming few months, I will be working alongside you to help us develop a Mission Action Plan for our church; a Plan of Action that will help us unfold together what we think God wants us to be as a church and what sort of activities and structures will enable us to be that church. There is much more to be said about that over the coming weeks and months. But at this stage, I just want to say that our unfolding Mission Action Plan is a living out, a fleshing out, of this verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”.

As a church, what do we need to die to? As a church, what do we need to do in order to be alive to God? As a church, how can we best reflect that new life in our community of Enfield? As a church, how can we best help others to experience their own new life in God?

Paul is absolutely clear in this passage. We stand in a new truth together. The old has gone, the new has come. We are dead to sin and alive to God.

As individuals and as a church…we have a responsibility to respond to the new truth in which we stand by transforming the way we relate to others, the way we relate to the world.

Paul concludes this passage by saying, “Consider yourselves…” and so we must constantly be working at this renewal of our minds so that we understand ourselves better and comprehend our new life in Christ and out of that will come the change that is required in how we behave and the priorities we live for.

“Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”. That is the task that lies before us as Christians, and as a church together. And the more we consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, the more we will be transformed and our community and our world will be transformed too.

Our task together over the coming few months is to work out what that will look like, on a practical level, and how we can best glorify God through our church, here at St. Andrew’s, Enfield