St Paul has a bad press. People think he's too complicated and says hard things, and today's reading from Romans comes from a particularly knotty passage. But we don't have to make things harder for ourselves than we need to. Fifteen hundred years after Saint Paul, John Calvin developed the doctrine of double predestination from this and other passages, leaning heavily on Saint Augustine's theology to do so. Double predestination means that God has already decided in advance who is going to heaven and who is going to hell: you're either chosen or you're not. Personally I find this idea both disturbing and impossible to square with the idea of a loving God. But Augustine was four hundred years after Saint Paul, and we don't need to read Paul through his spectacles any more than we need to wear Calvin's spectacles. Both of these great theologians were preoccupied with issues of their own day and interpreted scripture according to their own interests, which is quite legitimate. We do it too today; but if our interests are different from Calvin's we are quite at liberty to take off his spectacles. It helps if we raise our eyes from the page and look across to what other Christians are doing. The Orthodox churches have got along fine without the idea of predestination for two thousand years.

So are we going to throw Saint Paul overboard? No, but we can try to look at the text with fresh eyes. Let me remind you what he says. He begins by saying that the Spirit helps us in our prayer by interceding with sighs too deep for words; and this is according to the will of God the Father. So he is starting from the point that God is on our side and loves us. Then he tells us 'all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'. 'Those who love God' evidently means anyone who has responded to God's call to them: we only love God because he loved us first and is calling a response from our hearts. But that can be anybody. 'Those who are called according to his purpose' does not need to be read in an individualistic way, 'only those who are called but not those who are not called.' God calls all humankind: simply because he has created us, he calls us to be in relationship with him. His plan is to make us all like his Son: that is all that 'predestined' means. Everything else is a later interpretation. God knew in advance that a special kind of animal would evolve in his creation with a capacity for spiritual awareness; one that would be able to become like him and to love him in true freedom of choice. And in order to help us human creatures become more like Christ, God gives the Spirit that intercedes within our hearts with sighs too deep for words. Deep below the level of our rational minds, in a part of our heart that we are not always aware of, God has a stronghold that can never be taken away. We are oriented on God without realising it: the Spirit is at work in us.

And this is how we can understand the various pictures Jesus gives in our Gospel reading. The Kingdom of heaven is like mustard seed, or yeast, or buried treasure, or a multitude of fish in the sea. These are all about things hidden from sight that nevertheless work powerfully and offer abundant riches to those who find them. This is the Spirit working deep in our hearts. That is what the Kingdom means: not a place over there somewhere, but the sphere where God rules, which can include my heart. If we respond to God's call, if we are open to the divine power working within us, we are allowing ourselves to be changed, to become more like Jesus Christ, 'conformed to the image of his Son', to use Paul's words. We are all chosen, but we need to choose in return in order to allow God's love and grace to have their full effect in us. If we ignore God's call, the seed falls on stony ground.

So what practical application can this have in our day-to-day choices? The first thing is that it reminds us that God's choice of us is a bit more subtle than counting off teams for rounders. Every choice I make is truly my free choice and at the same time an opportunity to become more like Christ, if I can only be aware of it. Let's take a really simple example. It's raining and nevertheless I decide to walk my child to school rather than taking the car. This is my free choice, no-one is going to stop me driving. But what is the reason for this choice? It's probably a combination: I want some time to talk through yesterday evening's tantrum with my son, without being distracted by traffic. I want to make sure he gets some exercise so he can concentrate in school. I want to cut down my carbon footprint. And the reasons behind these wants are probably something like this: I love my son very much even though he's been a bit difficult this week. I think the best way I can help him is make sure he gets the exercise his body needs; this is love being expressed practically. I also feel it's part of stewardship of creation to be aware of the pollution I'm responsible for. And so, if I stop and think, I have made my choices from a mindset of being a loving, Christian person who is trying to follow God in the choices of daily life. So my choice has been influenced by God even though it was fully my own free choice: the choice to act in a certain way has been conditioned by the fact that I also choose to please God, because I love him, and I think the way to please God in this particular situation is to choose to do this. And that influence from God can be described as the Spirit helping me in my weakness; deep in my heart, the Spirit is orienting me and my choices on God. So at one and the same time, my decision was my free choice and the will of God at work in me. God's choice of me is at work, but I am not a remote-controlled robot.

It's almost as if Paul guessed that people would take his use of 'chosen' the wrong way. And by the way, many Bible translations make it harder by using the word 'elect'. Since Augustine and Calvin, 'the elect' has become a technical term for 'that in-group who are chosen by God, as opposed to the not-chosen'. So when we read 'the elect' in the Bible passage, our minds are already being shunted down a predestination alleyway. But all Paul is saying is 'chosen', as you would say 'this is the peach I have chosen.' Anyway, having said 'chosen' (and called, and decided on in advance, and justified, and glorified), Paul rams home repeatedly the idea that God loves us. 'If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who is to condemn? ...It is Christ Jesus who intercedes for us... nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God.' Paul is being as inclusive as he knows how, stressing how all-embracing God's love is, which makes it very hard to argue that all of this only applies to a small number of 'elect' while the mass of humanity is heading straight for hell.

Some people will tell you that what I am talking about is cheap grace, letting in the riff-raff who aren't theologically sound (though they wouldn't be quite so blunt). Well, firstly, there is good Gospel precedent for letting in the riff-raff, as you know. And secondly, being inclusive may be easy in the beginning, but it's harder once you're in, and not cheap at all.

Let's take a concrete example again. 'It is God who justifies: who is to condemn?' That's fine when I am thinking of myself as the sinner who is grateful for God's mercy. But what about when I am thinking of other people as the so-and-so's who are simply wrong? If I am a school governor, or a PCC member, and a decision is taken that I disagree with very strongly, what do I do? I can walk out in a huff. I can chunter behind people's backs. But deep down I know that this is not according to the will of God. It can be really challenging to admit to yourself that this person whom you find just impossible to deal with, is just like you a beloved child of God, following God as best they are able. You can't just write them off and exclude them. You probably have to continue to work with them (while finding ways of making sure they don't bring you to the point of explosion). Above all, you can disagree but you must not condemn. That's God's business.

This is the test of how like Christ we are becoming: how we deal with those with whom we disagree. Part of God's call on us is to be as inclusive and loving as God himself is, and the wider we draw the circle, the harder it becomes. As we're told in the Sermon on the Mount, 'For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? (Mt 5.46)

So the invitation to all of us this week is to engage with everyone we meet in the awareness that they are God's chosen sons and daughters, just as we are, and to learn to rejoice that there is room for even the widest of opposites, for me and for those who get up my nose, in God's all-embracing kingdom. We are invited to become aware of the Spirit of God praying within us with sighs too deep for words, and to join in the Spirit's prayer.