I don’t know about you, but I am something of an expert in shifting of the blame. One of my first thoughts when I do something wrong or foolish is “how can I get out of taking the blame for that?” I try to rationalize that this is someone else’s, or something else’s fault, not mine. You wanted me to go down that narrow lane and now I have had this collision. My boss sent me to this meeting unprepared and now I have made a fool of myself. This stupid knife is not sharp enough to cut through this branch, or stem, or string. That’s one of my favourites; my tools are never good enough to allow me to do a proper job. Usually I come to my senses and place the blame where it belongs, with me. But it is often a struggle.

I think, well I hope, that this is a fairly normal human reaction, to look for scapegoats to explain our own failures. Of course this works the opposite way round as well. When things go well, when we succeed, then it is all down to our own efforts!

A lot of people today feel that we have lost a certain sense of personal responsibility for our destiny. Someone else is always to blame for our poor education, lack of a job, illness, behaviour and so on. There are probably many reasons for this, but one seems to be that the more you help and support people the more they expect it. When that help and support is provided by the state it is soon looked on as a right.

I think it is very similar in religion, in matters of faith. We bring our normal human reactions to this and behave in very much the same way. Look at reactions to going to church, for example. When we don’t turn up or perhaps stop going altogether, whose fault is it? We blame the vicar, the churchwardens, our non-churchgoing partner, the kid’s football, the garden, Songs of Praise. The, perhaps unspoken, accusation we make is that these people and activities should take the blame for us not coming to church. But this is not right. These factors may well have influenced our thinking but **we** have decided that these are more important than worship. The decision has been ours, unless someone has chained us to the lawnmower! We need to take responsibility for our decisions. We do have free will. Most of us can set our own priorities.

Now coming to church is just an example and is not, of course, the most important aspect of faith. Just an example to show that this subtle process of shifting the blame, or responsibility, applies to the whole of our life, including our religious and spiritual life, if we are not very careful. I wonder if the words of St Paul, at the end of the eighth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, have something to say to us about taking responsibility for our destiny. To remind you, he ends the chapter with these words: “For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of Spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world to come, in the forces of the universe, in the heights or depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That is, at the same time, both wonderfully reassuring but also a warning. St Paul is assuring us that there is nothing that can come between us and God. Not worldly powers, or supernatural powers, not even death itself. This can, and should, give us great confidence that we have access to God. No one can stop us; no one or thing can come between us and God. This is one of the foundations of the Protestant church. We do not need a priest to give us access to God. Excommunication cannot cut us off from God. The sting in the tail of this wonderful news is, though, that we have no excuses. There is no one to blame. We cannot claim that we have been cut off from God, or have lost our faith, because of our family, our friends, our work, our government or our church. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ. This is tough, because as I said before, we look for someone or something to blame.

So can nothing at all separate us from God? Well, only one thing can do that and it is not mentioned in St Paul’s list. No prizes for guessing what, or who it is. It is simply us, we ourselves. I hope that this does not come as too much of a shock, but yes, we do have a choice. Salvation is not compulsory. God does not force us to accept his love, or to believe in him at all. We might wonder why. Would it not be so much easier if belief in God and acceptance of his love was automatic? It might be easier, but worth less, or perhaps even worthless. This is because of something that we value above all – freedom. God made us free to decide for ourselves which way to go, whether to do this or that, to choose the right way or the wrong way. None of us would want these decisions taken away from us. It is part of what makes us human. The natural consequence of this is that we can also choose whether to accept God, or to reject him.

Only we can separate us from the love of God, in Christ. Sadly this is a big, life changing decision, that we are not always willing or prepared to take. We are often unwilling to say yes or no and accept the consequences. Instead it is much easier to blame someone else; to say we would accept God’s love and follow Christ’s way, but we are prevented by other influences: poverty, wealth, the behaviour of others, the church we went to and so on. Jesus recognized this reaction, from when he called people to follow him. They said they would but only after they had buried their father, got married, sold a field etc. Excuses, excuses.

There are no excuses, or even good reasons. We are continually being given a choice, to follow Christ or not. Nothing can prevent us making that choice and if we choose to follow nothing can stop us. That is not, of course, to say we will be perfect followers; that we will not stumble or get lost. But if we have chosen to follow nothing can stop us reaching our goal; the love of God in Christ.