

“HOPE THAT DOES NOT DISAPPOINT”

(Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1-2,11-18; Romans 5:1-11; Matthew 9:35-10:8)

Not so long ago I was talking to a man who had been living in a Nursing Home for a number of years because of major health issues. He was far younger than the other residents of the Nursing Home: far younger than anyone would expect to have to live in such a place. He was a man of Christian faith, but understandably often struggled with why he should need to live in such circumstances. Was God punishing him? Had he done something wrong? Perhaps things would be different if he had taken greater care of his health earlier in his life?

When things get tough, it is natural for people to ask such questions, especially if they believe in a God who is supposed to love them. We want to know: if God really loves me, why is he allowing this to happen to me? I gave my friend time to talk through his concerns: neat answers are seldom helpful here. I acknowledged that it can be hard to remain strong in your faith when life is tough. And I also shared the thought that even in the tough times, God is still with us, even if we don't have all the answers. And we prayed.

I must admit that I didn't quote the words of Paul in today's reading from Romans 5 about "boasting in our suffering"! They are strange words from the Apostle, aren't they?

Generally Paul makes it clear that we have little reason at all to **boast**, although there are a couple of places in his letters where he does seem to boast in order to make a point about his ministry. But his normal message is that we are all sinners, and therefore we have no basis for boasting at all!

But this word for *boasting* can also have the idea of *celebrating* or *rejoicing*, and that is more relevant to the point that Paul is making here. Mind you, even that is a strange idea. It is one thing to bravely handle our suffering, but why celebrate or rejoice in our suffering? Well of course, you might remember the story of Paul and Silas chained up in jail in Philippi at midnight, and singing God's praises. So I guess Paul did indeed manage to rejoice in his sufferings!

Mind you, he is not saying that we should rejoice **because of** our suffering. He is pointing out that even in our sufferings there is reason to rejoice.

Firstly however, there is reason to **keep going**, because even in our suffering God is at work for our good. It is characteristic of God that he brings good out of evil. And we can be confident that even in our struggles and difficulties, God **is** still at work for our good. Remember that beautiful picture in Psalm 23: even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is setting up a feast for his people to enjoy. Even in the darkest place, he anoints our heads with the oil of blessing.

So even in those tough times, Paul is saying that there is reason to keep going. In fact, there is reason to **rejoice**: not because of our circumstances, but because God is still there with us. Because God is still at work. There is still hope, hope that is real. Something good **can** come out of this, in the providence of God.

Over the next three months, our Lectionary will take us through much of Paul's Letter to the Romans, beginning with this 5th Chapter. Romans provides Paul's explanation of the Gospel: what the Christian faith is all about, and how it works. Most of Paul's letters are responses to particular situations and problems, but this letter is Paul's carefully argued explanation of the Christian message.

In the first four Chapters, he has focussed on the reality of human sin: before God we are all guilty, no matter who we are, whether we are Jew or Gentile. Paul makes clear that all sin and evil must be dealt with by a righteous God. Judgement is a moral necessity. Evil cannot be swept under the carpet as if it didn't matter. But through the death of Jesus Christ, God's condemnation of sin has been truly expressed, **and** forgiveness made possible, at great cost to God rather than to us.

But forgiveness must not only be offered: it must be received, and we and any sinner can do that as we put our faith in Christ who died to bring us forgiveness. Paul makes clear that through **faith** in Christ we are justified: we are treated as righteous people, not as sinners. We are reconciled to God: we are no longer enemies of God, resisting his authority over us, but we are his friends, his beloved children.

A Christian then is a forgiven person, a person who is right with God, a beloved child of God. And that is not because we deserve this privilege or blessing. It is because of God's **grace**: his generous love which he has poured out on us, at a cost we can hardly begin to understand. We have no grounds for boasting about our relationship with God: it is all God's forgiving grace. All we do is humbly accept that grace in faith.

That is the message of Romans 1-4: how God graciously forgives our sin through Christ who died for us. From Chapter 5 Paul writes about how this works out in our lives. If we are Christians, how do we live a Christian life? It certainly helps not only to think about the **here and now**: we need to remember **what has already been done for us** through Christ, and we need to be aware of **God's promises for the future**, if we are going to live positively as Christ's followers.

And that's what we find in this morning's passage. Paul reminds us of **the way things were**. We were still weak, we were ungodly, we were sinners, we were God's enemies. But **Christ died for us**: the central demonstration of God's love for us. We have been reconciled to God. We have been **justified**: as an old explanation puts it, it is "Just as if I'd never sinned". God relates to us not on the basis of our unrighteousness, but of Christ's righteousness. We have been given access to God's grace and all his promised blessings.

That is wonderful. But does it mean that life from now on will be always easy? It's not that simple!

We have this loving relationship with God. We have God's presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit within. God's love has been poured out into our hearts. But we still live in **this** world, and it is a world where sin has not finally been dealt with. **We** ourselves still fall short: our relationship with God is real, but it is not yet perfect. And the world has its many problems. There are still evildoers doing their worst. There is still sickness and suffering and death.

And so in this world suffering may well come to us. I talk to my friend in the Nursing Home, and I read or see the news, and I know that **my** life has been pretty straightforward. Compared with many others, the suffering I have gone through in my life has actually been quite minor – even though at the time it has been pretty real to me!

Of course there are many forms of suffering: sickness, injury, rejection, the loss of loved ones, financial and personal struggles, and so on. I have not really been persecuted for my faith, but Christians in many parts of the world have suffered significantly for their faith. And I think that as he wrote these words, Paul was especially thinking of those who suffer for their faith. But regardless of circumstances, suffering is to some degree simply part of human living.

The reality we experience in the midst of suffering may well be hard to bear. But Paul encourages us to remember the bigger picture. To remember that God loves us, and that God is still with us. But why **rejoice** or **celebrate** in our sufferings? I think Paul is calling us to remember that there **are** realities greater than the struggles we are experiencing. In particular he is calling us to hold on to our Christian hope.

In the short term, God is ready to use our struggles to help us develop in our faith and our character. Paul writes about how suffering can produce endurance, and endurance produces character. Out of our difficult experiences, God can help us to **grow** as Christians: he can use these things for our good, and use them perhaps so that we can be more effective in his service, more understanding of others in **their** needs. That mightn't sound quite the same as God setting up a feast for us in the dark place, but God can use these struggles to develop our faith and our character.

And as we experience tough realities now, our Christian hope can also develop. We know that God has fulfilled his promises in the past. He loves us and has a wonderful purpose for us. We can trust him to keep his promises for eternity. So Paul reminds us that one day we **shall** share the glory of God: we shall share in the fullness of his kingdom, and we shall see him in his glory. Yes, there will be a judgement day, but through Christ we will not be condemned on that day: we will be welcomed into God's kingdom. As Christ died for us, so he rose, triumphant over death. God's promise is that we who trust in Christ who died shall also share in the fullness of his resurrection life in God's renewed creation. That hope is real. We can indeed rejoice in it!

God's blessings to us in Christ are **past, present and eternal**. Abram discovered that God's amazing promises to him would be filled through the birth of his son Isaac, when he and Sarah had good reason to give up hope. **We** have already received many of God's blessings, as Paul says, and we can be sure that he will remain faithful to his word.

So when suffering comes, let us remember that God is still at work in our lives in that dark place, and let us remember that through Christ we have hope in God's wonderful promises. Yes, **there is hope**.

In Christ, we have forgiveness, we have reconciliation, we have hope. God loves us. God is at work in us. And God will keep his promises. Amen.