

Holy Trinity 26th July 2020
Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Romans 8:26-39

Last Sunday we heard these words from the Apostle Paul, Romans 8:18,

‘I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.’ To the Apostle Paul suffering was simply part of Christian discipleship.

In fact, he lists some of his sufferings, elsewhere. He writes about being in prison, flogged, exposed to death, whipped 5 times, stoned, being ship-wrecked – three times – being in the open sea ‘a night and a day’, and many other things.

Paul was under no illusion that the Christian Life should be a bed of roses. But here he speaks of being motivated by what the Christian has to gain, ‘the glory that will be revealed in us.’ That’s the Christian hope.

In today’s reading, he continues that theme of encouragement. In v.26 he tells us, ‘the Spirit helps us’. How does He help us? Verse 26 continues: ‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness.’ A vague term – which covers anything which makes us feel ‘helpless’. We face many things today which I think come into that category. A world and governments seemingly out of control. Or our physical health – or that of our friends and family. Maybe other circumstances. But we feel ‘helpless’.

So what does Paul prescribe? ‘We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.’ Let me try to unpack for a moment what this phrase, ‘groans that words cannot express’ might mean. Only two words in the Greek, *stenagmois alalētois*. More than one scholar has suggested that this might be a reference to ‘speaking in tongues’ – mentioned otherwise only in the Acts of the Apostles and 1 Corinthians.

On the day of Pentecost, described in Acts 2, ‘tongues’ was what scholars call, ‘a novum’. Something new to the first hearers. And it became part of the experience of the early church communities. But they, because of its newness, were trying to work out what it was all about. In the Acts of the Apostles – it seems to mark out phases in the Christian mission. In 1 Corinthians 14 it becomes clear that it is a language of praise and speaking to God, and with interpretation, a means by which God speak to us.

If it is right to say that what Paul has in mind here is ‘tongues’ – then it is a sign of the Spirit of God’s own engagement in the suffering of the world. He groans. Verses 27 continues,

‘And [God] who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.’

Anything, that could be described as prayerful ‘groans’ would come into that category. Just being silent in the presence of God – can be an act of prayer.

Sometimes people speak of laying some issue out before the Lord. I love that idea. When you face a crisis – or want to pray about a crisis – why not do that.

In 2 Kings 19 we read of King Hezekiah receiving a letter from his enemies which included such statements as, ‘Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says...’ (19:10) and in verse 14 we read, ‘Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD.’ That’s a tremendous picture of praying ‘with groans that words cannot express.

So that’s one way in which can respond to ‘sufferings’. Another response mentioned in today’s reading is found in verse 31: ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ It’s rather like last week’s point. That is, God wins. Verse 28: ‘And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.’ That’s great news.

But how do we know we’ve ‘been called according to his purpose’? The answer seems a little complicated, verses 29-30. It includes the term ‘predestined’ which gets people a bit worried. They ask: ‘What if I haven’t been “predestined”’?

What does Paul say? Verse 30: ‘those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.’ Paul’s point is that God has done it all. Paul is not here wanting believers to question whether they’re saved or not – but rather to see that their salvation is certain. It’s not based on your own achievement.

How can we be sure that God will keep His word? Verses 31-32, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?’ Paul’s point is this: If God were not serious, He would not have paid such a cost.

The Cross is the Certainty. So, in verse 35, Paul asks the question, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' His answer is, NOTHING AT ALL. He quotes Psalm 44:22, 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' By so doing, he's in effect giving the additional assurance the none of what they're experiencing should take them by surprise.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13 he says something similar, 'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.' (NIVUK) That is, in short, 'God won't let us down.'

In verse 37 here we read that 'Christ ... is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us'. So not only is the Spirit interceding for us, but Christ also. When we engage in prayer we are praying, as it were, alongside the Spirit and Christ. Not surprisingly we see that in verse 37: 'in all these things [= circumstances] we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.' Then again in verse 39: [having covered every single possible scenario], [nothing] 'will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

So when faced with 'sufferings' – which Paul makes clear can be understood very broadly – anything that makes life difficult. Remember God. God who is with you through His Spirit. When you pray something really happens – even if what you pray may seem to you like 'meaningless groans'. God who loves you – and promises to keep hold of you and will, to go back to verse 17 where Paul calls us 'co-heirs with Christ', and will ensure that you receive your inheritance.

Prayer

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**