

Sermon: Longing with Hope (5th July, 2020)

This week I kept looking at our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans wondering, "Can I make it any shorter?" In the end I concluded that there were no bits that could be left out. It is one of the most extraordinary and inspiring passages in the whole of the New Testament and deserves to be read in full. I am only going to draw out three themes from this reading today, but either during the course of this sermon, or later this week, do take time to read it again, and use it to inspire you in prayer.

The first great theme that struck me as I was reading the passage was that of creation. I was talking to someone this week who said that the time of lockdown had really helped them to re-connect with the created world. Life for them had slowed down, and they had been found time to enjoy some of the more simple pleasures in life - the flowers in their garden, the trees in the park. I think for many of us that has been true. I've noticed the larger numbers of people passing my study window on the way to the allotments, or the numbers of people in Memorial Park even at 7am in the morning when I have gone for an occasional run. People reconnecting with nature. Maybe the extraordinary weather we had in April and May also helped.

The lockdown may not just have helped many to reconnect with nature. It may also have helped to show that environmental damage is not inevitable, that we can turn around the destruction we are causing through carbon emissions and other pollutants, if we want to. It was remarkable to hear of fish returning to the waters of Venice; and to see pictures of reduced pollution over our cities. Ever increasing air and road traffic does not have to be the case. I was amazed and impressed to hear the head of one of our main automobile associations argue that it would be better for the government to invest billions in better broadband rather than in new road projects.

At this time of perhaps unique opportunity to rethink how we respond to the environmental challenges of our world, Paul's words speak with relevance and power across the centuries. For he speaks of how creation itself groans as in childbirth, how it longs for new life, to be liberated from its bondage to decay; how, indeed, creation longs for a new humanity, a people who will care for and tend the world with love. In writing in this way, Paul takes us back to the very beginning of the Bible and the first three chapters of Genesis - of how God created humanity to care for the world He had made, to nurture it, to tend it, to help it grow in abundance and fruitfulness; and then how through our selfishness and sinfulness, we allowed death and decay into the created world, how we began to treat the earth as something to be exploited and abused.

As the people of God we are called to be those who value and appreciate the beauty of the world around us. In the words of the American author, Annie Dillard, to "not allow nature to play to an empty house", but to notice and delight and marvel. We are called to encourage and nurture the health and the abundance of the natural world, whether in our gardens, our parks, in our city or in the countryside. And we are called to care for the environment, to be at the forefront of reversing the devastating impact of our own polluting actions, to re-think our attitudes towards air-travel, carbon emissions, our use of fossil fuels. We have much to learn but we have a unique opportunity to change. As Paul writes, creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, those who will respond to His call to care for and love His world.

The second great theme that speaks to us I think at this time is that of prayer. It is not just creation that groans, that longs, for a better future, but we ourselves. Paul writes: "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption." The first fruits of any crop are a foretaste of what is to come. They are eaten with delight for what they are, but they are also eaten with an expectation and excitement of the full crop that is to follow. As Christians we are tasting the first fruits of the future with God, that sense of life and hope and joy and peace. But they are only the first fruits. There are times when the full harvest feels a long way off, when the challenges and struggles of our current existence weigh us down, when

we want to cry out with the Psalmist: "How long, O God, how long?" Here we are as a church, some gathered here in the building, others at home, and though we may be thankful for the fact that we are seeing gradual change, we may be crying, "How long, O God, how long before we can fully meet again?" For some the cry may be of personal suffering - how long do I have to experience this pain, or this treatment? Or it may be watching a loved one suffer or seeing them gradually deteriorate? How long, O Lord, how long? Or it may be facing economic anguish of the days ahead, wondering how we are going to make ends meet. Or the pain of injustice and discrimination. How long, O Lord, how long?

In these times, Paul acknowledges, we don't always know what or how to pray. We lack the words. But it is in these moments, these moments when we may feel overwhelmed or inadequate, that as we come before God, the Spirit prays on our behalf with groans that words cannot express. There may be times when you just don't know how you can pray. Come to God in those moments with your pain, your grief, your loss, your anger, and let the Spirit intercede on your behalf. Prayer is not about being articulate or theological. It is about honesty in the presence of God. Sometimes all we can do is to say: "Father, here I am. I am out of words. But you know how I feel." Those prayers may be the profoundest we will ever make.

And the third great theme for me from this passage is this: acknowledging the groaning, the longing of creation, for a better world; acknowledging the groaning, the longing of ourselves for a better life; Paul offers us a source of great hope. As we face the challenges ahead, do not get overwhelmed: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul asks the rhetorical question, "If God is for us, (this God who loves us so much he was willing to give his own life for us; this God who raises Jesus Christ from the dead; this God whom the Spirit and the Son sit alongside, interceding to on our behalf), if this God is for us, then who can be against us?" Paul is not saying this in a glib or triumphalistic kind of way in which a sports player or a politician or a general might say "God is on my side - I can do whatever I like." This is Paul who has suffered beatings, imprisonments, persecution, who has on many occasions barely escaped with his life from dire situations, and who is even now, writing from such a situation. This is Paul who has no organisation or ecclesiastical infrastructure and hierarchy to give him clout, no real authority other than what people are willing to give him. From a position of weakness and suffering, he writes these words:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" All things Paul himself has experienced. We could add to this list in these times, isolation, loneliness, despair, sickness, bereavement and more. "No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Take time to breathe in those words: "nothing can separate us from the love of God." In the uncertainties of the coming weeks and months, may those words act as our rock, as our firm foundation. We are held in the love of God.

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