

Romans 8.26-39

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? 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? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

Jesus told the crowd a parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

Reflection

Having started to look at the readings for today, I have had a song/hymn, namely,

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea,
a great High Priest whose name is Love,
who ever lives and pleads for me.

which goes on to say

Because the sinless Saviour died,
my sinful soul is counted free;
for God the just is satisfied
to look on Him and pardon me,
to look on Him and pardon me.

(Charitie Lees Smith 1841 – 1923)

This hymn, it seems to me, has clear links with the final section of Romans Chapter 8.

During the last few months most of us have experienced a series of separations: from the 'care free life' as we knew it; from loved ones – either temporarily or with their death; the ability to do what we want when we want; to go on holiday; life without fear or worry over being ill and what it might mean for us or a loved one to be ill. All these are the result of Coronavirus and its effects on us, our family and friends, on society as a whole. As a result, by the time you read this, we may be exiting lockdown but the price for that is that we should all be wearing a face-mask in shops and on public transport. Some of these have been easier for some to endure than others. Those asked to shield have found it difficult not going out at all. Those who have had to cope with the death of friends &/or family have found it hard not, perhaps, being able to be there at the end because they were in hospital or being able to attend the funeral because of the restricted numbers allowed to attend. This has also meant that other transitions – for example between Infant & Junior Schools, between Primary & Secondary Schools and between Schools & College/University – are all very different this year and some have had to make that transition without properly being able to bring the earlier stage to a proper ending.

To all of these unsatisfactory endings, transitions and uncertainties, I think I can hear Paul getting his megaphone out and wanting to shout at us very loudly. At the beginning of Chapter 8 of his Letter to the Church at Rome, he clearly says "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (verse 1). In the middle of our reading today, verse 28, he adds "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." He goes on to proclaim loud and clear "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (verse 31) and rounds off the chapter with confidence "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (verses 38 – 39).

Part of his confidence comes from the simple truth that Jesus Christ – the one whom God sent to take on human flesh and to die upon the cross for us – is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow (Hebrews 13.8) and, as Psalm 103.11 – 12 tells us,

"For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

If we take the statement that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ" seriously, it means that God is truly and irrevocably for us – not against. Yes, Satan / the Devil will still want to

whisper in our ear – like a destructive Jiminy Cricket – that we are no good and unworthy of God's love. And, in some senses, he is right in that we cannot earn or deserve the love of God and his eternal life - as Paul reminds us " ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ..." (Romans 3.23). However – and it is a massive however – that is not the end of the story. Christ Jesus came in flesh to take our sins upon himself on the cross so that all those who believe might be redeemed through his broken body and blood outpoured. As a result, God is unreservedly on our side and nothing can change that. The consequence is that whatever Satan might try to whisper in our ears to convince us to the contrary, he is wrong.

When we stand before the throne of God – as one day each of us must and give account of our lives and service to him who redeemed us – however short of the target we might fall, the verdict of God is secure that through the blood of Jesus we are washed clean – whiter than snow – and that we are guaranteed through that sacrifice and marked with the Holy Spirit as a seal (2 Corinthians 1.22) to receive the eternal life that God has promised us.

That does not mean, by the way, that we are exempt from pain and suffering. The Christian life is not about that. Indeed, even as we live out our lives, death is all around us. Whatever life may throw at us – and it will, I'm afraid, at times, throw the very worst – we need to hold firm to the truth that "... in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (verse 28). It may not seem like it but that is undoubtedly the truth. Our lives are rather like a carpet or tapestry. Each of these has two sides: the first is the front or main picture side; the other is the reverse. The front side is the good side that clearly shows the picture intended by the artist / designer. God is the designer, in case you hadn't guessed. The front shows no blemishes, knots or the working out so-to-speak. By comparison, the reverse is often very rough and show where threads have broken, new threads have been spliced in – and you can't see any of this from the front. Living on the reverse – as we do – all we see is the untidy, knotty, often ugly side. From our perspective, it can be difficult – if not impossible – to see the picture that is being built up on the fair side – the side that God sees.

In this process of weaving the carpet or tapestry, the presence of the designer / artist is crucially important. He – or she – is there constantly keeping watch to deal with the broken threads etc that might otherwise mar the picture. As we live out our lives, Paul wants us to hold onto the certainty that "... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (verses 38 – 39)." To my mind this confidence of Paul brings into my memory the poem Footprints:

One night I had a dream.

I dreamed that I was walking along the beach with God and across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonged to me and the other to God.

When the last scene from my life flashed before us I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at times along the path of life there was only one set of footprints.

I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of my life. This really bothered me and I questioned God about it.

"God, you said that once I decided to follow You, You would walk with me all the way but I noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed You most You would leave me."

God replied, "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never, never leave you during your times of trials and suffering."

When you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you".

When things get dark, complicated or even just downright scary, when we can see no way out of our present difficulties, this is a wonderful picture to hold onto. God may, at times, appear to be absent but the reality is that he is always with us – for, indeed, nothing can separate us from him – and at our lowest points that is when he is closest to us to the point of carrying us when we lack the strength to carry on.

I pray that each of us, no matter what we face, may know, with the certainty of St Paul, that God is for us, will never leave us and will, if necessary, carry us so that we can journey on with him to the glory that awaits us as his children. Amen.

Rupert