

## 30 July 2023; Romans 8:26-39; Pastor Fraser Pearce

Last week Pastor Joshua focused our attention

On these words of St Paul: **I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.**

He talked about the fact that for St Paul

Suffering was not an abstract theological problem

But a lived experience.

St Paul, the Lord's chosen apostle:

The one who had encountered the risen Christ

And the one who had mystical experiences of the glory of God,

Was the same person who had suffered beatings, stoning,

Shipwreck and exposure, along with calumny and detraction.

But for St Paul, the very real suffering that he experienced,

And that we, in our different callings, experience as we live by faith,

Is nothing compared to the glory that God

Is going to reveal to us: weigh them against each other in the scales

And the suffering doesn't register against the glory.

Today we are going to hear about why St Paul could say this,

About why he could have such confidence in God

In the midst of very real suffering.

From St Paul's words I'll be proclaiming Good News:

If ever you have wondered whether God really does care for you,

Especially if you've experienced abandonment

Or shame or physical weakness or distress,

And especially if you have experienced these things

Because you have been faithful to the Lord and his teaching,

Then be assured: God has not left you,

On the contrary, he is working out his plan for your life,

And will work all things, including your faithful suffering,

To your good, and his glory.

St Paul starts by acknowledging that we do experience real weakness,

Even when it comes to living out the life of faith.

Listen to what he says: **[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not**

**know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of**

**the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

When we are in need, especially when we are suffering,  
It can be difficult, if not impossible  
To put into words what we are experiencing,  
And what our needs are.

But St Paul says that God doesn't not leave us alone in our suffering,  
But gives the Spirit who intercedes within us and for us.

Who *intercedes*: Jesus can talk of the Spirit as an *Advocate*:

As one who understands us from the inside out,  
Who can speak our needs to God better than we can ourselves,  
Even beyond words.

Think of a new-born infant who takes in breath for the first time,  
And cries out in its need with sounds beyond words  
*And yet full of meaning*, with sounds that inspire  
A strong and bonding maternal response.

This is what the Spirit does for us: being the voice within us  
Crying out to the Father.

It's because we have this bond that St Paul can then say: **We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**

St Paul does not say that God works freedom from suffering:

Our Lord Jesus Christ carried the cross,  
And as we place our trust in him, we carry our cross too,  
But just as God brought good out of the cross of Christ:  
Just as he brought forgiveness, and peace, and new life  
Through the suffering and death of his Son,  
Just as he brought the resurrection out of the crucifixion,  
So we can trust that he will bring good out of our distress,  
Out of our faithful suffering.

St Paul makes it clear that this is *God's* doing.

This is what he writes: **For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.**

Talk of predestination can make us uneasy,  
But think about what St Paul is saying:  
Our life of faith, and what we suffer in it,  
Is not meaningless or purposeless,  
Rather it is part of God's plan to grow is to be like our big brother,  
To be like Jesus.

If you want to think about this in story form,  
Think about the narrative of Joseph in Genesis:  
He was sold into slavery by his brothers,  
And he ended in prison in a foreign land,,  
Not because he had done evil, but because he had trusted God.  
Joseph's brothers meant to do evil to him,  
But Joseph persevered in faith, was freed from prison,  
And eventually found favour with Pharaoh  
So that he could be an agent of salvation from the very brothers  
Who had wished him evil.

Do you remember how the narrative ends?

After their father Jacob dies,

The brothers think Joseph will take his revenge: **Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? *Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.* So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.'** In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

This shows in story form what St Paul is talking about:

That God is on the side of those who place their trust in him,  
And that their suffering is not a sign of abandonment by God,  
Rather, through faithful suffering God works his good and glory.

St Paul goes on to put all this into Christ-focus.

Listen to what he says: **What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?**

First of all: God is for us; he is on our side.

Since this is the case, then what can any opposition to us do?

We can be fearful and despondent

When we think the cost that can come from confessing Christ,

And from holding fast to his teaching,  
And it might indeed mean suffering mockery or rejection  
Or job opportunities or even our physical safety.  
Jesus has reminded us that the worst those who oppose God can do  
Is to kill the body,  
But is God who can give life to the dead.  
What's more, God has shown his great love for us  
In giving his own Son: if God does not hold back his own Son,  
But out of great love let him go into death  
As the one who can lead us into life,  
Then we can be sure that God will not hold back from us  
Any gift that will bring us eternal blessings.

St Paul puts it even more powerfully: **Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.**

Christ, who knows what it is like to suffer human weakness,  
Who knows what it is to suffer,  
He is the one who speaks up to the Father for us,  
Who brings us into the presence of God.

That is why St Paul can end with 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? ...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.**

Remember: St Paul, who wrote these words,  
Knew what it was to suffer for living out his trust in God.  
He knew from experience what he encourages us to trust:  
That no opposition that we face as we place our trust in Christ  
Can separate us from the love of God for us.  
God, who started his work in us through the Gospel,  
Through the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins  
In Jesus name, he is close to us,  
And will work out his good purpose in our lives.  
To him be the glory now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.