

9 June 2022; Romans 5:1-5; Trinity Sunday; Pastor Fraser Pearce

First of all, a question for you:

Imagine you're watching the news, and you're hearing a report

Of a man who is being taken to court for some crime.

The camera crews are outside the building,

Filming the accused as he is being led into the court.

What do you visualise? What is the body language of the accused?

Chances are that you are visualising someone trying to cover their face:

Someone trying to hide their identity.

I have a hunch that especially when people *know* that they are guilty,

That the case *will* be made against them,

Then they especially feel shame, and want to hide

From the accusing glare, from the ostracizing hostility of the public.

At least that is how I would feel,

And I think it's how most of us would feel.

Guilt and shame: these are natural human responses,

And it can be hard for us to know what to do

When we experience these powerful realities.

But today I'm proclaiming good news from God's word:

That God relieves us of our guilt by declaring us innocent

For Jesus' sake;

And that God transforms our shame

So that we can have confidence in, rejoice in, boast in,

Even the sufferings that we experience on the path of faith.

OK, let's hear how today's reading begins: **Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**

The key transitional word here is 'justified'.

To understand this word, it is good to have in our minds

The image of a courtroom, and with us standing accused in the dock:

Will we be declared guilty, and so be condemned,

Or will we be declared innocent, and so be justified?

For the first chapters of Romans St Paul has been making the case

That all people, whether Jews or Gentiles,

Stand accused under God's law,

And more than this, that we are guilty of breaking the law:

Either the law written in the books of Moses,

Or the law written on the human heart.

St Paul, however, proclaims the Good News

That Christ Jesus has come to take our guilt on himself,

And give us his own innocence, so that we,

No matter what our ethnic background,
May live at peace with God and with each other.

So, since God has acted for us in Christ Jesus,
We are declared innocent, we are justified,
And in trusting this message, we do not have to hide from God
As our first parents did,
Rather, we have access to God in all his favour to us.
As St Paul says later in the book of Romans,
We can call out to God as Father,
Knowing that we are in fact dearly loved children.

Now if you spend the rest of this sermon daydreaming about this,
About the fact that in God's courtroom
You have been declared innocent,
That you can approach God with the same unselfconscious confidence
That a little child approached their loving father,
Then God's Spirit-filled word is doing its work,
And God bless you in your daydreaming, in your meditation.
But I'm going to go on with the text,
Where we will hear how our justification means
That God takes even our suffering and uses it for our salvation.

Listen to what St Paul writes: **and not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,**
OK, I'll pause here on the word boast.

To get an idea of what's going on it helps to think
Of the *opposite* of an accused man going to court
Shamefacedly trying to hide from the public glare.
What would *that* look like?

It'd look like someone walking tall,
Looking at people in the eye,
Knowing that he was innocent, and that even the worst charges
Would not stick: in fact, the worse the charges
The greater the vindication that is to come.

Now, as a rule, sufferings are things that we do not rejoice in,
That we do not advertise to others -
Especially if the sufferings seem to be the result
Of our own poor choices, or foolishness, or sin.
But St Paul is saying that as justified people,
As people declared innocent by God,
We can take a very different attitude to our sufferings,
To the real struggles that we have in the life of faith.

This is what St Paul says: **and not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character**

produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Did you notice that there is a progression here?

Suffering produces endurance,

Endurance produces character,

And character produces hope.

If I'd written this, it would have been different.

I would have said something like:

Hope helps us deal with our suffering:

That we can weigh our future hope

Against the present reality of distress, as a way of coping,

Of getting through a difficult time.

But St Paul says that suffering, endurance, and character,

Work hope, produce hope.

How are we meant to understand this?

I've got an analogy that works for me,

See if it works for you.

In the last week New Zealand played England in a test match at Lords.

If you like cricket, I recommend the highlights,

It was a great test match.

Anyhow, NZ did well in the second innings,

And the English batsmen could have felt

That there was no realistic hope for a victory.

Maybe Joe Root, the English batsman, going in

To face the nasty fast bowling, the sledging from the opposition,

The possibility of making a fool of himself on a world stage,

Maybe he would have thought not about victory,

But about the fact that he was on the team, and had a job to do,

And rather than hide away from the challenge,

That he would act according to his calling, and face the chin music.

OK, let's put ourselves in his shoes:

He has the sufferings of the situation,

But we could say that he rejoices in them, he boasts in them,

They are part of the challenge of being on the team,

Of being called up to play for his country.

So he bats, and he stays in: he endures, ball by ball, over by over,

And it produces a mindset, a character, a disposition:

'I can get through this, one ball at a time.'

And from this character, the score builds, and it produces hope:

Hope that goes from, 'we can win this' to 'we are going to win this'

To 'the victory is ours'.

I think St Paul is saying something like this

When it comes to the Christian life:
That we do not need to see our sufferings
As signs of God's displeasure with us:
On the contrary, we are justified, we are declared innocent by God,
We are part of his family by his grace,
And our trust is in Christ Jesus.
As justified people, therefore, we can approach our sufferings
In a different way: they are part of the challenge of Christian life,
But as we live out our callings day by day, as we endure,
It shapes us, so we develop a tested character,
One that does not give up, but faces difficulty with maturity,
And so grows into a disposition of hope
That the victory of Christ over the grave will be seen in our lives too.

Now listen again to how St Paul ends our reading: **hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**

A perhaps more accurate way to translate this would be
That hope does not put us to shame:
It does not make us want to cover our faces or hide away:
God's love for us frees us to walk tall,
And to know that whatever is thrown at us,
Will only lead to our greater vindication.

This is how St Paul goes on after our set text for today: **For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.**

Dear friends in Christ,
Since God shows his love, since he proves its strength, its reality,
And its transforming power in Christ dying for us
While we were still sinners, then we can be sure
That now, in being reconciled to God,
He will accomplish *in us* all that for which Christ died,
Including our incorporation as fully alive human beings into the life
That the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoy as one God.

May God sustain us in this faith,
So that we learn in our own lives
That suffering produces endurance,
That endurance produces character,
That character produces hope,
And that this hope does not put us to shame,
But raises us up into life with Triune God.
In Jesus name. Amen.