



Sermon preached on 19 July 2020 by Revd Nigel Uden

Readings: Matthew 13.24-30 and 36-43; Genesis 28.10-19a; Romans 8.12-25

Whenever we receive a letter – or these days, an email – it will be obvious that it comes from someone in a particular context and situation. If the writer is British, the first thing they're likely to mention is the weather and how it makes them feel. As letters develop, we often discover something of what the writer is up to and of things that are on their mind. So, for much of 2020, a communication has rarely concluded without some reference to 'these strange times'.

By the same token, letters are written to people who are in particular contexts and situations. Maybe it's a birthday or a bereavement, a new job or a disappointment that's upset them. Or perhaps it's a 'let's keep in touch' letter. Very soon the letter will get to its point, offering a 'thank you' or an apology, an enquiry after wellbeing or a word of goodwill, or simply a 'how are you doing?'.

Every letter in the New Testament is similarly written to people in a particular context and situation, by someone who has their own background and agenda. The letter to the Romans from which we just heard is no exception. This author, who has so profound a Jewish heritage, is writing to Christians in a Gentile community. A prominent feature of the letter, therefore, is that the new righteousness offered by Christianity is for both Gentile and Jew. Paul writes, 'there is no distinction between Jew and Greek.' And quoting Joel, he continues, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (Romans 10.13; Joel 2.32)

Moreover, Romans is a late epistle of Paul. He has spent years thinking through the issues he addresses here. Even though it is a letter to a community rather than a lecture to a classroom, Romans is felt to be his most carefully thought-through statement of the Christian faith into which his inherited Judaism has morphed. It is a theological treasure trove for anyone who seeks the idea to renew a life that feels battered or shameful, empty or aimless, or just not quite complete. Whoever we are, in Romans we discover that if we call on the name of the Lord, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

There is, though, another element of Romans. Here we learn of Paul's awareness of suffering. His writing in this way is not unique to Romans; many see it as a central theme of other letters, not least Philippians. What is more, he realises that suffering is not peculiar to human experience. Suffering is integral to the whole of creation; it affects everything. He didn't have the science available to today's climate change campaigners, nor does he speak quite as Greta Thunberg does, but he is passionate about creation's decay and groaning and subjection to futility. In short, Paul addresses 'the suffering of this present time'. He doesn't deny suffering. He doesn't explain away suffering. He doesn't attribute blame for suffering. Rather, he uses his lifetime of theological thinking to reflect upon suffering, and upon the glory that will be revealed to us.

So it is that we might be liberated to ponder suffering ourselves, rather than feeling guilty that suffering troubles us and undermines our faith. We might ponder suffering from in the midst of it, as we find ourselves or someone who matters to us, suffering personally. Or perhaps we ponder suffering with that peculiarly contemporary lockdown perspective of watching Covid-19 wreak its havoc across the globe, and even amongst people we know, whilst we're carrying on ourselves quite normally, subject only to inconvenience, and to the embarrassment of admitting that whilst others mourn or struggle to breathe we have quite enjoyed the change of pace and lessening of demands. There is another perspective from which we might ponder suffering. It's the complicating sense that compared with the coronavirus, with the war, poverty, abuse or injustice that some people are suffering, our own circumstances seem trivial, even though to us, right now they actually feel truly awful: mental health-threatening, energy-draining, joy-sapping, perhaps frightening.

Whatever the perspective of our pondering, Paul's recognition is important, that suffering is part of life, just as is Jesus's recognition that in human society there are weeds amongst the wheat. Let's not be so naïve as to pretend we can wish away these flies in life's ointment. Suffering is. And because it is, it needs pondering. In one brief sermon, I do not anticipate solving the conundrum it poses. Rather, by mentioning three things that Paul seems to suggest in this morning's epistle reading, I'd like to encourage thoughtful consideration of suffering as one of life's unwelcome, but inescapable givens, lest it rocks, even removes our faith.

First, suffering is a place from which to call out to God. Both history and our own experience demonstrate that we cannot side-step suffering; that's proven by the disease's incurable grip, the abuser's hideous malice, the bigot's illiberal prejudice and the earthquake's wholesale destruction. But religious faith – not least Christianity – teaches us from within suffering to cry out to God. We can choose to battle suffering alone, and many do; many have to; maybe you have. And sometimes that's just how some of us feel best able to cope with it. The Jesus who goes to the cross, however, doesn't reveal a God who abandons us to suffer alone. Whatever Calvary means to us, let it show how the 'pain-bearer' goes to life's darkest places with us. Christ doesn't try to make of life a bland idyll where nothing challenges, threatens or goes wrong. No, Christ is God coming into the world where a great deal challenges, threatens and goes wrong. Christ enters into that suffering with us. From there, we can join the psalmist as we sang a moment ago: 'There is nowhere on earth I can escape you: even the darkness is radiant in your sight.' It's as if by that very crying out we turn on the night-light of God's presence – a presence which doesn't take away the suffering, but which offers companionship for it.

Secondly, might suffering be the spur to strive as children of God for the restoration of creation? Earlier this year, when society saw the suffering that the pandemic caused, it refused to lie down and let suffering win. Stung by the coronavirus's virulence, society rose up to counter it with an even more potent compassion – that 'suffering with' which is so often redemptive, in the home and in the community. Witness the army of NHS volunteers, of good neighbours, of steadfast key workers, of innovative teachers. So it surely is in the face of many another instance of creation's groaning. Seeing God enter into suffering in order to redeem it, are we not roused to join with God in meeting suffering head on with love? How else are we to react to those neglected or marginalised, those defeated by others' inhumanity or nature's disasters? Jesus Christ hurls love at suffering and as the Body of Christ surely that is our vocation, too. As Downing Place Church prepares to move next year into its beautifully redeveloped premises, that expensive project will only be justified, only be justified, if it is the vehicle for us in worship,

to celebrate the God who enters our suffering with us, and in service, to hurl love from the heart of God into the heart of Cambridge.

Result? God is glorified. Not glorified because he's a cruel tyrant who sneers while he watches, unfeeling and unaffected as his subjects suffer. No, the God we know through Christ is glorified as that 'pain-bearer' who lovingly shares our suffering on the cross and whose resurrection shows how love remains faithful and resilient, even in the face of the worst that life can throw at us.

That's the God I can glorify and enjoy forever. Both because that measure of love we see in Christ somehow redeems my suffering and because it stirs me to be part of God's redeeming of others' suffering.

It's quite a letter. Quite a vocation. Quite a God, to whom alone be all the glory, Amen.