

St Brandon's, Sermon for 23rd July 2017

Romans 8. 12-25 (Isaiah 44.6-8; Matthew 13. 24-30, 36-43)

Paul's Hope

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I hope this sermon is going to make sense because I'm hoping a reasonable number of you will come to the discussion after, I'm hoping it won't put anyone off!

Now those of you who were here last week might already have spotted the intro link: Mike started with an apology, I'm starting with a hope because, yes, because I'm going to talk about hope.

Hope is one of my favourite words, not for sound theological reasons, but because it allows me a certain tentativeness: when I say 'I hope' something I mean 'it would be nice if this would be so'; I use the word hope in a warm, fuzzy sort of way.

Paul really doesn't! Paul means something really precise and challenging when he writes about hope.

Precise is not always the first word people associate with Paul, maybe 'compact', 'solid', 'dense' – definitely challenging - he's not an easy read!

So, **if** I'm suggesting we base our discussion on the reading from Paul, I think we'd better go back through it a section at a time to unpack it.

I have limited understanding, and we have limited time to do this, so here goes - you may want to follow it on your readings sheet.

The passage jumps us straight into the end of the theme we have heard over the last few weeks where Paul draws absolute contrasts between what he calls 'living in the flesh' and 'living in the spirit'.

Paul clearly expects his readers to know from experience what he means by that because he's not specific about details.

Living in the **flesh** is something more consuming than just the need for food and clothing and seems to be the way of the **unbeliever**. (and those who rely on the Law but we're not going to go there today).

Paul may be appealing to his audience of believers to know in themselves what he means by simply contrasting how they feel and where their attention is when they feel filled with the Spirit, compared with how they feel when they drift away from God and get led into more worldly values.

Paul emphasises the need to live in the Spirit, which is transformative, not in the 'flesh' which is death.

Its more than just a passive choice: these are 'life and death' issues, we are to make a positive choice to build belief and a spiritual life if we are to have the strength and power of the Spirit – the resources within us - to overcome the temptation to just slide back into the ways of the world:

“for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the

deeds of the body, you will live.”

Living in the Spirit and allowing God to lead us will be the way into life.

We will be allowing ourselves to be led as his children, which means, as his children, we are acknowledging him to be our Father.

The relationship of Father and child is one of love and nurture, that is how we are invited through faith to relate to God, not as master and slave.

We are not made to be God's slaves living in fear but graciously adopted by him as his children, which is a free, not earned, loving relationship that wants us to be freed of fear.

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”

The world is a scary, hard place, we are right to be afraid of many things in life when we face it alone, in our own strength, but facing it with God our Father to help and guide is a much safer prospect, his love pushes out the fear.

When we get overwhelmed we call on him 'Abba, Father' because in those moments of desperate need, we know we need him as the child needs the parent.

'When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God”

Paul goes on to suggest that being adopted as children of God carries with it a huge promise, an inheritance: we will be the heirs, the inheritors, if we behave as God's true children.

How will we know how to behave as God's true children, who will we model that on?

Jesus, of course! God's true Son.

Although not equal to Jesus, we will share in the inheritance with him if we are truly God's children, growing into the likeness of his own Son .

But here comes the crunch –

we know the ultimate, defining thing Jesus was ready to do was to be crucified. He died, and rose again, we say 'in glory' which is shorthand for everything that was different yet the same about Jesus as the risen Christ.

The crunch is that Paul expects us as God's adopted children to be ready to suffer, or be part of suffering, if we are to be Christ-like.

To accept and own the suffering aspect of life as much as the love and being loved.

Only if we can accept that suffering is part of the deal are we able to inherit the rest and be raised after death into new life.

'If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.'

To Paul, this is a no-brainer of a deal:

Paul is having a rubbish time with any amount of persecution, imprisonment, hardship and suffering in plenty, but he reckons that is an insignificant price to pay for the value of the inheritance coming his way.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about

to be revealed to us.”

And then he explains why.

It seems the inheritance is not limited just to us children of God being raised in glory but that the whole of creation will be freed by that action.

Where has Paul got this idea from? Is he just getting carried away?

Paul explains and justifies his claim in his next sentences:

he points us back to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and the point at which it all went horribly wrong.

Paul is expecting us to remember the story he is alluding to, when, having eaten of the forbidden fruit, God says to the woman

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children ... And to the man ... cursed is the ground because of you, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread ... you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

It's to this story that Paul is referring when he reminds us that Adam's actions damned creation as well as mankind.

Paul says it like this

“for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it” meaning 'by the will of Adam'.

Phew. Right. So if Adam's bad choice resulted in creation no longer being a garden of Eden but at least in part, a field of thistles, when Adam's offspring eventually get themselves turned around - when humankind finally puts itself right with God - becomes redeemed - no longer dust returning to dust but freed from that cycle and raised in glory – then, too, will creation be set free again.

'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God ... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'

Now we step back a step and realise that Paul is reminding us about Christ as the joint heir along with the children of God because Christ, as first among God's children, has already suffered on the cross to pay the price of Adam and set us free from sin.

Christ has already been raised in glory.

Therefore, Paul sees the promise that the whole of creation is to be set free, as something that

has already started, it has started but has not yet come to completion.

This time of suffering is the working out of the time between 'in the beginning', 'is now' (that's us) and 'what shall be'.

It is a painful time, the time leading up to the birth of the new – not least because of Eve's curse:

'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.'

That is the great hope that is in Paul that he offers us:

that certainty that Christ has bought us an inheritance that is beyond all we can imagine and desire, yet is at present, nowhere to be seen.

That death on the cross saved us in hope that we will in our freedom as children of God, choose to become so Spirit led that we We what? We cannot know, we cannot see it.

'hope that is seen is not hope.'

What lies at the end of time is unknowable except in what Jesus and the prophets have told us about its being the final judgement and glory ...

The gospel story vividly describes the end time as the gathering and destroying of all causes of sin and all evildoers – this will be the world like we've never seen it *'for who hopes for what is seen?'*

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father – the promise that exceeds all we can desire -

'if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'

A promise of end to suffering and injustices from all time, all of history, globally.

Do **we** wait for this patiently?

Not resigned to suffering but with hope for the glory to be revealed to us?

Not watching suffering with detached complacency (it doesn't matter because God will sort it all out in the end) but with active compassion as children of God?

Does this promise from God make a difference to how we manage suffering now, personally and globally?

God promises in the end to destroy all causes of sin and all evildoers from all time, all of

history, but meantime,
evil is allowed to continue, ironically, to avoid destroying the good:
the weeds are allowed to stay until the harvest in case pulling them out uproots the good.

Does this make a difference to how we understand the difficult question of 'Why does God **allow** suffering?'

We can return to this in our discussion after the service, do join us if you can.