

**Brancepeth Sermon
Harvest and Climate Sunday
25th September 2022**

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Romans 8: 22-25

Open our ears, O Lord,

to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always.

Amen

I'm going to take an unusual step this morning,
of beginning with what in university circles we call
a 'content warning'.

Because of the passage I've been given to preach on,
I'm going to end up talking this morning
about pregnancy and labour pains,
and that will involve talking a bit about what happens
when pregnancy goes wrong,
and becomes a danger to both mother and baby.

I know that's difficult territory for some,
not least when it's some bloke up the front
prattling inanely on about it,
so if you need to focus on something else,
or pop outside until I've finished, that's quite okay.

The reading that requires me to talk about labour pains
is the one that we have just heard from the book of Romans.

It is an extract from a letter written by the apostle Paul
to the Christians in Rome - Christians he had not yet met, but
whom he was hoping one day to visit.

Now reading Paul's letters can be quite a challenge.

And one part of that challenge comes if we
misrecognise the kind of writing they are.

I think people sometimes approach them as if they were
full of complicated, technical theology -
as if Paul were some kind of academic theologian,
writing abstruse material for a highly educated audience.

It's as if the recipients of his letters would have needed
fat dictionaries of theology to hand,
to look up the terms he used.

But most of the time, that's not what is going on at all.

The problem with Paul is not so much that he is too technical
as that he has a wildly fizzing imagination.

He thinks in images - whole strings of images,
each one giving way to the next
in a sometimes bewildering kaleidoscope.

He piles image upon image,
without worrying too much about how they fit together,
each one a little window onto the truth he's trying to convey.

But because the church has lived with his words for centuries,
and pored over them,
and tried to work out exactly how they have gone together,
we've tended to turn them into
something much more technical, something much drier.

The passage we just heard read is a good example of how Paul's mind works.

It's a pile - really a jumbled pile - of images, which don't add up to a single, neatly coherent picture, but which do take us on a journey of imagination.

I'm going to try to follow that journey with Paul, unpacking the images one by one.

That does mean, I'm afraid, that it will be quite a while before we reach my main theme, which is the theme of creation - the Harvest theme.

Before we can get to that, we need to understand the various images that Paul piles up.

Let's start with one key image, which Paul comes back to many times - an image he clearly loves.

It's the image of adoption.

The key idea here is really simple.

Paul lived in a Roman world,
where adoption was a highly visible part of life.

The heads of prominent Roman families quite often decided
that instead of passing to one of their biological children, their
fortune and position should pass
to one of their protégés, someone they had discovered.

And if you were adopted like that,
you became part of the family,
you took on your benefactor's name,
you became an *heir*.

Paul loves this image, because it enables him to say:

‘Look, you and I have been adopted by God.

We have been taken into God's family.

We bear God's name.

We are destined to inherit God's kingdom.

None of that is our natural right -

God didn't *have* to treat us like that.

It's ours because God has chosen us for it,

freely given it to us,

though we had no reason to expect it.

We have been made children of God -

or, rather, we're *in the process*

of being made children of God.

But there's another key image here, that Paul likes.

And that's the image of labour pains.

And thinking about this image is a good way to see

something of the wildly fizzing way in which

his imagination works.

He's got in his mind this first image of God adopting us -

God making us part of the family,

God remaking us as God's own children.

But Paul is also thinking about the suffering

that he sees Christians undergoing.

And that combination sparks another image in his mind.

What kind of suffering accompanies
the process by which children are made?

Well, labour pains of course.

So how about, he says,
you see the suffering that you are currently undergoing
as labour pains -
as the severe but temporary pain
that accompanies a new birth?

Paul likes this image because it is an image of
suffering *that will not last*.

He wants to say to the Romans: I know you are suffering.

I know you can't see the end of it now.

I know it seems like your whole world.

But it won't last.

There is something beyond it.

And one day, like a mother receiving her baby
from the hands of the midwife, at the end of a long labour,
the suffering you are now undergoing will come to seem
like *nothing* compared to the joy that you then feel.

Of course, these two images – adoption and labour pains –
really don't go together very well at all

Rather obviously, you get labour pains when you're
giving birth to a child biologically,
not when you're legally adopting someone as your child. And
we normally think of labour pains as suffered
by the parent, not by the child.

So if you try to turn what Paul says here
into a logical argument,
or a technical explanation,
it quickly becomes nonsense:
why on earth would we be suffering labour pains
if we're in the process of being adopted?

It doesn't make any sense.

But it's not a technical explanation, it's a string of images.

Imagine yourselves as people being adopted by God, he says.

And imagine the suffering you are experiencing
as an unavoidable but temporary accompaniment
to the process of becoming God's children -
so imagine it as some kind of labour pain.

Adoption and labour pains:

two images that relate, but that don't quite go together.

But that's not all.

Paul even throws in a third image, too,

by using that word 'redemption':

imagine that as well as adopting you,

God is buying you out of slavery.

And there's a fourth, behind the phrase 'first fruits',

that has to do with thank offerings to God.

I'm not going to try to explain these other images,

I just want you to note that they are there.

Paul gives us four different images

in the space of a couple of sentences.

As I say, Paul's imagination *fizzes* -
and the main problem when we try to make sense of his words
is that there is way too much going on.

But don't worry too much about how all of these images -
adoption, labour pains,
purchase from slavery, and thank offerings -
go together.

Don't try to turn them into a coherent *explanation*.

Paul is trying to speak about
something too wonderful words;
he is trying to help you imagine
something that is beyond imagining.

And so he piles up these images because
no one image will do.

Just let each one cast its own little light - and
help you imagine one aspect of your salvation,
one aspect of the wonderful thing that God is doing.

But there's one more aspect
of Paul's imagination in this passage that I want to focus on -
and this is finally going to get us to the theme of creation.

Paul is imagining himself and his fellow Christians
as people being adopted by God into God's own family.
He's imagining their suffering as some kind of labour pains -
suffering that will eventually give way to joy.

But this second image runs away with his imagination.

He finds himself thinking,

What if we don't just see our *own* suffering -
say, the persecution of the church by the Roman authorities -
as a kind of labour pains?

What if we see *all* the suffering around us as a form of labour.

What if we see the *whole creation* as groaning in labour pains?

There's an imaginative leap in Paul's thinking here.

He finds himself not just thinking about his own salvation,
his being made an heir of God's kingdom,
and leaving everyone else behind.

He finds himself not just thinking about
the Christian recipients of his letter,
being made heirs and turning their back on everyone else.

He even finds himself not just thinking about
the whole Jewish people, and then the whole human race
as he will a couple of chapters later.

No. He's suddenly found himself thinking about the future, the joy,
that God has for the *whole world* - the whole of creation.

He has suddenly grasped a new facet of God's
unimaginably rich work of salvation.

The whole creation - *all* that God has made -
is the focus of God's love.

The whole creation - *all* that God has made -
is destined for joy.

The whole creation - *all* that God has made -
is being adopted into God's family.

The created world is not just a backdrop to the story of salvation.
It's not just *scenery*. It's involved in the action.

And so the suffering we see in *the whole of creation* is temporary,
is destined to end,
is destined to give way to delight.

The *whole creation* is groaning with labour pains at the moment,
but is destined for something more.

Imagine yourself, Paul is saying,
imagine your own journey, your own suffering,
your own salvation,
as part of a cosmic drama, a divine comedy
that includes the whole of creation -
the whole world that you see around you
groaning, and yearning, and waiting
until God's healing work, God's restoring work,
God's work of adoption, and salvation
encompasses it all.

In the last bit of this sermon, I want to run with this image,
and take it in a direction Paul wouldn't have imagined,
because his context was so different from ours.

I want to stick with this idea of the whole creation
experiencing labour pains, while waiting for us to be born -
waiting for us human beings to become what we're meant to be, to
become and behave like children of God.

Because in the situation we're in at the moment,
the situation of climate crisis, environmental crisis,
if this image of labour pains is the one you have in mind,
you'd have to say that something
is going badly wrong with this pregnancy.

If the whole creation is experiencing labour pains,
while waiting for us to be born,
you'd have to say that at the moment it looks like
this pregnancy is going to end in disaster.

It looks like this mother is dying in childbirth,
being killed by the baby inside her.

When Hester was pregnant with Tom -
and I've checked with both of them that I can tell this story -
it became clear as the due date approached that
something was wrong.

Tom was already pretty big,
and it turned out that he was the wrong way round.

If things had been left to take their natural course,
it's highly likely that neither Hester nor Tom
would be here today.

The eventual solution was a C-section,
which worked out fine -
but before that, they tried something else.

They tried something called *external cephalic version*.
That is, the doctor tried to turn Tom round manually,
by putting his hands on Hester's bump,
trying to grab hold of Tom's head *through* Hester,
and trying to turn Tom round *from the outside*.

If you'll forgive me the understatement,
I think it's fair to say that *nobody* involved
enjoyed this process -
especially because, in Tom's case, it simply didn't work.

But that's the image I want to leave you with.

The whole creation is experiencing labour pains,
while waiting for us to be born -
waiting for us to inherit the life of love and justice
that God has in store for us,

And at the moment something is badly wrong.

If we're the baby, we're killing our mother,
and so killing ourselves -
and drastic action is needed to save us.

And what we need is, I think,
some kind of *external cephalic version*.

That is, we need to be grabbed hold of, and turned around.

We need to be turned to face in a whole different direction,
so that we stop posing a danger to our mother -
the whole of creation - and to ourselves.

It's not going to be just a matter of a small change here
and a small change there.

It's not just a matter of cutting down on this,
and recycling that.

We need a whole deep change of orientation -
and I'm afraid that, like external cephalic version,
it is going to hurt.

At a macro level, for instance, it is going to involve
giving up on an economy that relies on endless growth.

It's going to involve refusing to extract
all the natural resources that we think we can extract -
especially fossil fuels.

At a more local level, it's going to involve all of us
in deep changes to our habits,
our expectations, our spending, our travel -
and we're still only at the beginning of that process.

External cephalic version, that's what we need:

being grabbed, and turned around,

so that we stop killing ourselves and our planet.

But although it is going to hurt,

I hope we can face this challenge with Paul's image in mind.

The suffering that we face will not last for ever.

It is not all that it is, and it is not the end of the story.

We may groan, but our groans are like the groans of labour,

and we can face them knowing

that God has a future for us and for the world.

'Weeping may linger for the night,

but joy comes with the morning.'

We may not see that joy yet,

we may see only the struggle and the challenge,

but we hope for what we do not see,

and wait for it with patience.

Lord,

for the sake of our world, and for our own sake,

turn us around.

Teach us new habits and expectations;

teach us a new, more sustainable way of living together

and living within your bounteous creation.

And help us to give glory to you as our Creator,

and as the Creator of our fragile, beautiful world.

Amen