

23rd October 2016
Romans 8 vs18-39

Suffering, Glory and the Love of God

The fiftieth anniversary of the Aberfan disaster made me recall my time at ministerial training college and a lesson by a Baptist minister who had been ordained in 1966 just a month before the Aberfan tragedy. He said he didn't know how to respond as a newly ordained minister at the sight of over a hundred innocent children being killed when a coal slag heap slid into their classroom. It was a crisis of his faith. He had to go back to the foundations of his hope in the gospel at times like that.

In this second section of Romans Chapter 8 Paul returns to a familiar theme in this letter, the troubled state of the world. He talks about suffering and glory: *'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed' verse 18-19.*

So I want this morning to talk about suffering and glory. Living in hope means we live with confidence that nothing lies beyond the scope of God's loving purpose and power. We can endure current suffering, even injustice and oppression, because we are confident that God will 'do right' by creation. That our destiny is glory. In this sermon let me outline this Christian hope and my reasons for why it is so much more superior

and special than any other hope or belief in the world around us.

I have been reading Timothy Keller's book 'Walking with God through Pain and Suffering'. It's an excellent book, indeed anything Keller writes is excellent and I highly commend his writing to you. He's a Reformed theologian, senior minister of The Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York and has got the reputation of being America's leading evangelist to a sceptical age in the line of CS Lewis. In his book he tackles the theological issues of suffering and also the pastoral issues of suffering. He shares many personal testimonies of people who have been caught up in suffering and found God's purpose and power in it.

Emily tells her story of how her Christian husband left her and her four children for another woman. She was crushed and wondered how this could be God's plan and purpose. She had faith that God would heal her heart and that something good would come from this but how and why she did not know.

She was full of anger and her children suffered badly: their father's wants seemed to come before their needs. She wanted to see justice but realised it was not hers to inflict. She wanted to forgive and not be consumed with bitterness but didn't know how.

God told her to pray. She said she has come to know God on a whole new level. She had never had a big tragedy in her life – never really had to depend on God, truly just fall and rest on him. When she needed God's

comfort the image in her head was her clinging to Jesus and him hugging her. Her image is now her just completely collapsed and him carrying her.

In the midst of this tragedy she sees glimpses of what God may be doing and how their lives have changed. And where she may be at the end of it. She writes:

‘Like being in a race where it starts to rain and you hit a mud pit. You can’t go round it and the rain and the mud are weighing you down – you can’t go through it fast, you must concentrate on each painful step... but at the same time someone is keeping you upright and compelling you to continue. In the distance you see what appears to be a sheet of rain and then you see it – the sun. The person you will be there will be stronger, with more understanding of how to run this race, and with satisfaction and peace. Yes that person is tired but they are also energized by the experience. In every fairy-tale there is a tragedy and the protagonist faces adversity, overcomes it and thrives because of it. God is giving us a fairy tale – what do you see at the end?’

Keller believes that suffering and tragedy can be transformed because of the Christian faith and in the book he lists five key doctrines, which are all contained in this passage of Romans. These beliefs give us hope and a sense of purpose in our trials and tribulations.

First of all he makes the point that in our Western culture we have changed our attitude to suffering. If you ask most people what the purpose of life is they will say it is to be happy, have pleasure.. Suffering is

therefore going to be an intrusion on a secular person’s view of what life is all about. Suffering will upset your pursuit of happiness and pleasure. People who have never bothered about God until suffering came along – often then complain to God ‘Why me?’ ‘How can I believe in a loving God when this happens?’

Part of the problem is many people’s underlying belief is that God created the world for us and our enjoyment. The Bible says God created us and the world to enjoy God. It’s not about us, it’s about God. The Bible says the main purpose of life is to know God and enjoy Him forever.

Paul says we have the assurance of being members of the divine family so we can cry out to Abba Father, and we know a God who loves us - Paul then goes on to address the tension between having a relationship with God and yet being in the world that is full of pain. He uses the picture of childbirth. In verse 22 *‘We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.’*

I was privileged, if that is the word, to have been at the birth of my three children. On all three occasions Debbie had a hard time. The shortest labour was Libby of only 11 hours and the longest was Joanna who kept us waiting for 29 hours. At the birth of Joanna, our first child I remember entering the labour ward with Debbie and it was a busy evening. Thundering down the corridors were the sounds of women groaning and shouting, often swearing, particularly at their partners.

It was very foreboding! I knew this wasn't going to be pleasant. Poor Debbie!

Paul uses the picture of child birth to describe the present reality of the universe. Things aren't right with the fabric of the cosmos. It is groaning for liberation, groaning for freedom – like the pangs of giving birth – when will it all come to an end, this is agonising, this is painful. Creation can be a beautiful thing but it also have its ugly, dark side. We know of the cruelty of nature, the disasters that can befall, the diseases that are loose. We know of the evil within humanity: the present open sore of Syria is an ongoing example of that. The Bible says we contend with the world the flesh and the devil – there is opposition in our world to God's good purposes. When will it all end? When will the pain be over?

Of course the pain of childbirth does come to an end and usually results in the joy of birth (although it often didn't in Paul's day). Many women then forget all about the pain and a couple of years later you try for another child!

Paul signs a hopeful yet realistic note. That there is pain in the world but it will lead to new birth - it will lead to glory - it will lead to new creation.

In ancient times Christian faith was widely recognised as having superior resources for facing evil, suffering, and death – it continues to have assets for sufferers arguably far more powerful than anything secular culture can offer. These assets reside in robust

distinctive Christian beliefs all of which are contained in this letter to the Romans:

The first relevant Christian belief is in a personal, wise, infinite and good God who controls the affairs of the world – and that is far more comforting than the belief that our lives are in the hand of fickle fate or random chance or touching wood or the movement of the stars.

I mentioned last week how the Spirit of God testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. By the Spirit we can cry 'Abba' Father. A close intimacy with God who is love and loves us as a parent loves their children. In verse 28 Paul says

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who ^{LU} have been called according to his purpose.

It would seem to say that Christians do not need to say that every tragedy or loss is part of God's plan. We can say that in every tragedy or loss God is still God and still moves our lives and all of history towards what is good

William Sloane Coffin is one of the most prominent preachers in the American Church... A Presbyterian Minister and former chaplain of Yale University, he lost his son in an accident. At the funeral, the minister conducting the ceremony made some feeble statement about the accident and the boy's death being God's will. Before he could finish, William Sloane Coffin stood up and yelled at the preacher 'the hell it was! It

wasn't God's will at all. When my son died, God was the first one who cried!

Like William Sloane Coffin, Martin Luther, the great Reformer, also lost a son. His wife Katie, shouted at him, 'Where was God when our son died?'

Martin Luther answered, 'the same place He was when His own Son died. He was watching and weeping!'

The second crucial tenet of our faith that Keller suggest is important for why Christianity helps us in our suffering is that in Jesus Christ, God came to earth and suffered with and for us sacrificially – and that is a far more comforting idea than a belief that God is remote and uninvolved. The cross also proves that, despite all the inscrutability, God is for us not against us.

So Paul can say in verse 31:

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Paul goes on to remind us that no power in creation can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. The list of the creation's powers – death, life, angels, demons, powers in their heights and depths – remind us that for Paul the world is populated with forces that call for our allegiance and threaten to control us. We are driven by forces stronger than ourselves but forces weaker than God. Forces that seek our allegiance or that try to convince us that God does not love us.

Halloween is next week. I heard someone say it a day in which we can worship the devil. No it isn't. It's a day to mock the devil – because despite all his trouble he is going to lose. He is a defeated foe. Can anything separate us from the love of God?

For Paul God has answered that plea in Jesus Christ. Christ is God's steadfast love in whom God reveals God's face and raises us from the dust to eternal glory. The resurrection for Paul is the key sign that the forces of death and destruction will be overcome. It is a picture of a victory not yet realized but well under way. Like D-Day which was not the end of the war but the beginning of the end. In God's final victory, God will lay claim to the whole creation by the love God has shown in Jesus Christ. We will be more than conquerors because no force in heaven or earth can separate us from that love. That is our hope and our confidence.

The third doctrine is that through faith in Christ's work on the cross, we can have assurance of our salvation – that is far more comforting than a belief in karma or reincarnation. We are assured that the difficulties of life are not payment for our past sins, since Jesus has paid for them. As Luther taught, suffering is unbearable if you aren't certain God is for you and with you. Secularity cannot give you that, and religions that provide salvation through virtue and good works cannot give it either.

The fourth great doctrine is that of bodily resurrection from the dead for all who believe. This completes the spectrum of our joys and consolations. One of the deepest desires of the human heart is for love without parting. Needless to say, the prospect of resurrection is far more comforting than the beliefs that death takes you into nothingness or into an impersonal spiritual substance.

The resurrection goes beyond the premise of an ethereal, disembodied afterlife. We get our bodies back, in a state of beauty and power that we cannot today imagine. Jesus resurrection body was corporeal – it could be touched and embraced and he ate food. And yet he passed through closed doors and could disappear. This is a material existence, but one beyond the bounds of our imagination. The idea of heaven can be a consolation for suffering, a compensation for life we have lost. But resurrection is not just consolation. It is restoration. We get it all back – the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life – but in new unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength. It is the reversal of the seeming irreversibility of loss.

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that ^[h] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

When an IRA bomb tore apart the town of Enniskillen in Northern Ireland on Remembrance Sunday 1987, killing eleven people including a twenty year old nurse Marie Wilson, her father Gordon Wilson said these words in response:

'I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet and she is dead. She is in heaven, and we will meet again. Don't ask me please for a purpose. I don't have a purpose. I don't have an answer. But I know that there has to be a plan. If I didn't think that, I would commit suicide. It is part of a greater plan and God is good. And we shall meet again.'

Well is there any sense to life? Are we at the mercy of random chances? Is there no justice, no plan, and no hope? Or behind all things is there a force, a power, a person, who seeks to bring good, who will do what is just and right, and who loves us come what may? In our passage from Romans this week, Paul makes some bold statements of faith and a ringing affirmation of God's goodness to us in Jesus Christ.

One final testimony from Tim Keller's book is the story of Tess who was a physician. As a doctor she marvelled at the delicate nature of being and the tenuous balance of life by the sheer grace of God. The idea of pain and suffering occurring and people asking the question 'why me?' should also be 'why not me? What did I do to deserve this unmerited string of unbroken blessing?'

In August 2012 she gave birth to Wyatt, her third child. Life was near perfect for her family until Wyatt died only fourteen weeks later. She and her husband prayed for resurrection as they couldn't accept the grief. They prayed not their will be done but yours O God. She said God heard their prayer and He said NO. In the end the cause of death was positional asphyxia or Sudden infant death syndrome.

But she writes: *'The end hasn't been written. The Lord has shown us over and over again how He never intended for us to go through this alone. He gave us Himself and he gave us the Body of Christ.'* Members of the church helped out with the childcare of her other two children as they coped with their grief and shock. They were allowed to descend to the very depths of their grief, experience it in all its agony and merge out the other end. When they emerged their church community had been transformed in unity through suffering and she became pregnant again: *'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.* She wrote. *Tess writes this: Our pastor said that God gives us what we would have asked for if we knew everything that He knows. The idea that the prince of heaven would empty himself and become poor, to live and dwell among us is humbling. The idea that there is nothing in the human experience that God himself has not suffered, even the death of a child, is sustaining. And the idea that in his resurrection Jesus scars' became His glory is empowering. God will use these scars for His Glory, as*

they become our glory. Indeed, the end hasn't been written yet.'

In the midst of suffering may God grant us a vision of His Glory.

Pray the truth in of these verses:

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

'And in everything, as we know, he co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.'

We are more than conquerors through him who loved us....'neither things present nor things to come, nor any powers..., can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

References: T Keller: Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, Hodder 2015