

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 2020.

Genesis 29.15-28

Psalm 105.1-11

Romans 8.26-39

Matthew 13.44-58

I think it's true to say that most humans like stability in their lives. There are some who are excitement junkies or revel in change, but even those enjoy that from a position of some control. No one likes chaos and change that we haven't chosen is mostly unwelcome and draining. This is one reason why COVID-19 has had such an impact on the world, quite apart from making millions of people sick and at least contributing to the death of hundreds of thousands.

Advances in science, medicine and communications over the past few decades have meant that we can control many aspects of our life and live in a fairly predictable environment most of the time.

Of course in reality our life is always fragile and ultimately unpredictable. Anyone who has had an unexpected bad medical result, or an accident, knows that really when we wake up in the morning we don't know what the day will bring-good or bad. What COVID-19 has done is unmask that reality.

While we live in a world with a great deal of beauty, we live in a flawed and broken world marred by sin and sickness and actually we don't have ultimate control over our life at all. The reality of human existence has been laid bare and that has been hard to deal with.

In the midst of all that, we were on an optimistic track, heading towards a relaxing of restrictions and a return of some normality at least within Australia. But the uptick in infections in Melbourne and Sydney over the last couple of weeks has even taken away much of the optimism and reminded us again that this virus is very hard to control, even with huge amounts of resources. Some certainty looked possible, but that has been taken away.

In the midst of this challenging but realistic time we have the second Bible reading for today from the letter to the Romans chapter 8 verse 26-39.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is a lot of gold in that passage and it's worth spending some slow time reflecting on it, since there isn't time in this talk to do anything like justice to the whole thing. I do want to pick up three points though:

1. The Spirit helps us in our weakness
2. All things work for good for those who love the Lord
3. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love.

One of the things we sometimes experience in tough times is that we find it hard to pray and sometimes are not sure what to pray. St Paul in the first part of this letter encourages Christians that while we are sometimes in situations of significant weakness, not knowing what to do or how to pray, actually it doesn't all depend on us. A bit like the COVID19 app working away in the background on our smart phones, the Holy Spirit is actually interceding for us in such a powerful way that Paul describes it as, 'interceding with sighs too deep for words'. Intercession beyond words. Praying for us, interceding for us when we don't know how or what to pray. When words won't come or don't make any sense. Ultimately it doesn't depend on us. In our weakness the Holy Spirit prays for us. That's incredibly encouraging.

The second point comes from Romans 8.28 and the full verse is: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'.

Sometimes bad things happen to Christians. Christians are not immune from the troubles of this world or this life. The consequences of COVID19 catch Christians and non-Christians alike. However, those of us who are Christians, who are called according to God's loving purpose into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, can know that even when things go bad, ultimately there will be good. Ultimately the purposes of God will work, and God can bring good from bad, and hope from despair. This is a great promise and I am sure those of us who are Christians have experienced this promise being kept. I know I certainly have.

Third, St Paul wants to tell the Christians in Rome very clearly that though they go through difficult times, their reconciliation with God through Christ means nothing can separate them from God's love.

We can sometimes feel alone and lonely. Sometimes the realities of life are very harsh. We lose our job, we or people we love suffer sickness or grief or loss. We have relationship difficulties or financial hardships or just plain fear and uncertainty. All of these can make us feel far from God, and sometimes can make us question God's love for us.

Paul, writing to Christians in the city of Rome who themselves were going through a tough time, says very clearly that nothing can separate us from God's love. Paul says, 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Nothing, not even the consequences of COVID19 can separate us from God's love. God is with us. The Holy Spirit prays for us and God is active in making all things, even bad things, work for good for those who love him.

So what might our response be in the face of the very real challenges we face? In the light of what Paul is saying we have the choice to surrender to God. To decide to trust God. To base our today and tomorrow and the rest of our future, on the character and purpose of God as Paul teaches.

We can of course choose to ignore these promises and live as though they don't exist or aren't trustworthy. That's a choice we can make. But if we do that, we are missing out on the quality of life that God offers to us.

Much has changed this year. It's not the year any of us were planning. The tricky thing is that planning anything beyond even a few days seems very difficult in the quickly changing COVID environment we have. The uncertainty can be very draining. Many people have lost jobs and money and businesses and things are tough. There seems not much we can do except do what we can to keep ourselves and our community safe. Although, actually there is something. We can surrender to God and put our trust in God and so more and more have peace in our heart. Even more than that, we can let other people know about this possibility and encourage our fellow Christians who might be finding the going extra tough. These blessings that Paul outlines are for us but not only for us. They are for all.

The offer from God is there for us all. Even those among us who maybe don't have a Christian history. Reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ is available to everyone. Every person on earth. We can accept that offer and put our trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we can know that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words; we can know all things work for the good for those who love God; and we can know nothing can separate us from God's love.

Those three things are worthy knowing, accepting and offering to others.

Amen.