

**Romans 8:22-27****Living in hope**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

You don't have to look very far in the world around us to realise that things are not right. Even ignoring the ongoing pandemic, we have concerns about the climate, about violence in the Middle East, and don't forget the mouse plague over on the east coast. It's easy to look at the world around us and think that there's no hope. Maybe for some of you, it's a little closer to home, and you've lost all hope, but can't bear to admit it. Whether it's finances or relationships or your health, you've got nothing more to give.

To this, the word of God promises a lifeline. When we cannot even hope for ourselves, the Holy Spirit hopes on our behalf, the church endures with us, and the whole creation groans in solidarity. We are not alone. Hope remains because Jesus is still Lord. Hope remains because Jesus is still risen from the dead. Hope remains because Jesus has sent us the promised Holy Spirit. But that hope might seem a bit elusive at times. And this is normal.

We need to remember that when the bible talks about hope, this is not a naïve optimism that ignores the reality of sin and suffering. It's not telling us to just stop worrying and be happy. True hope is born out of the assurance that what we see and experience in this life, in this world, is not the end of the story.

Even though, as we read in Romans eight, all creation is groaning because of the fall into sin, there is a promised future. Earlier in the chapter, St Paul tells the Christians in Rome that that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). Yet St Paul doesn't gloss over the present reality of suffering. We all experience it, because we're all part of a world in bondage to sin, death, and decay.

St Paul speaks of the whole creation experiencing this bondage and 'waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (Romans 8:19). The whole creation groans as in the pains of childbirth as it waits. But this is not futile or despairing, but with looking with hope toward the promised new creation. It's interesting that St Paul uses both birthing and adoption imagery to describe the reality of living in this world. While the creation experiences labour pains, we who have been adopted as God's children and have received the first fruits of the Spirit still await the completion of our adoption, 'the redemption of our bodies' (8:23).

There is very much a now and not yet aspect to all of this. On the one hand, our adoption papers have already been signed. Through baptism, we have a place in the family of God. We are already counted as co-heirs with Christ. We have already tasted the fruit of the Spirit, the new life of living in God's presence and power. And at the same time life on this side of eternity is still marked by suffering. Not just ours, but the whole of creation. And being children of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit does not remove us from the suffering of creation but draws us in to walk alongside those who are suffering. St Paul doesn't go into great detail as to what this suffering looks like, but it doesn't take much for us to imagine what that means. And we also recognise that some of that suffering is from our own doing. We don't live perfect holy lives. We make decisions that ultimately are not good for us.

This is the paradox of the Christian life. We wait for what we already have. We are at once saints and sinners. We are holy children of God and live according to the desires of the flesh. We reign as co-heirs with Christ and live as slaves. We are free and in bondage. We are alive and dead. The first things are what we are in Christ – holy, righteous, and free children of God. The latter, all the things that we are in and of ourselves – sinners enslaved to the desires of the flesh.

We have the Holy Spirit, but St Paul is quite clear that the gift of the Spirit does not mean we instantly reach spiritual maturity. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the first fruit of our adoption as God's children, an adoption that still awaits completion. But the Spirit is with us in our weakness. When we don't have the words to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us. When the hope is all but lost, and we can't even muster up a brief prayer to God, the Spirit intercedes for us. When the world around us seems overwhelming and we don't know where to start, the Spirit intercedes for us. Because of this, when we experience conflict and suffering, we are not driven to despair. We know that the Spirit is bringing about redemption, and so we live in hope.

This redemption will mean life and freedom for all creation. The whole creation will be redeemed and restored. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, one of the consequences was the cursing of the ground and need for much toil to produce food to eat, not to mention the thorns and thistles that would grow instead. "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:18). Even that will get redeemed.

Because of all this, we can't help but live in hope. It requires patience, a watchful, expectant waiting that doesn't give in to despair even if little evidence of redemption is in sight. But today we celebrate the fulfilment of a promise to send the Holy Spirit, and this assures us that the day will come when God fulfils his promise to redeem the world and bring about the new creation. And in the meantime, we live in the joy of the resurrection, the joy of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the joy of knowing that the Spirit is with us as our Advocate, the seal of the promised inheritance, and the one who guides us into all truth. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.