**Romans 8:18-39**

**Living with life’s tensions**

It’s so good for us today to celebrate this baptism today, because Emma and Junior and the kids are so much a part of our church family here that we want to celebrate together this special moment in their spiritual lives.

And baptism is that real and present symbol of the presence of God in our lives, winning a victory for us over the fallen, sinful self. Yes, we continue to get things wrong in our lives, yes we continue to fall short of God’s grace. But he is always there for us to pick us up, dust us off, and help us get back on the right track again.

And that’s what this passage we have heard read from Paul’s letter to the Romans is all about.

Paul is writing here about the paradox of life in which we find ourselves; that we want to live holy lives, to be faithful to God - but we keep being drawn back to another way of living that is often less than glorifying to God. We are living in a state of tension between sin and grace - and Paul wants to help us come to terms with that rather than constantly trying to fight against it, because if we try to fight it, that is a battle we will never win and we will just end up becoming depressed, anxious and feeling guilty.

And Paul begins with a really optimistic idea, that we can learn to come to terms with this tension in our lives, verse 18: “I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are not to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us.”

When Paul talks about sufferings here, he is not thinking about the sufferings of everyday life, like financial worries, bad health and so on but the sufferings we have to endure as a result of our Christian faith. Not persecution or mocking from others - but the suffering that comes about because of the tension of spirit and flesh: the fact that we are trying to be faithful in discipleship but fall short because of the weakness of the flesh.

Paul is saying that, Yes, it may be hard to live with the tension of spirit and flesh but it’s all worth it when we think about the coming glory that will be revealed to us. Paul acknowledges that it is tough, that trying to live a spiritually disciplined life is hard work but he is saying to us “Hang on in there – keep going. Not long to go now!”

And then, by way of encouraging us even more, verses 19-22 show us that we are not alone, as individuals or even as human beings but that the whole of creation joins us in working out this tension, this suffering and that the whole of creation is waiting with anticipation just as much as we are! And the way Paul portrays it here is almost like a play, where we are the actors and creation is the audience and creation is watching this spiritual story unfold in humanity and is waiting eagerly for the happy ending.

And what is the happy ending? Verse 19: “For the eager expectation of creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God”.

And here’s the encouragement for us: it’s not that creation is waiting for us to be made children of God but waiting for the revealing of our true nature. We are already children of God! We are heirs to his glory already – that’s our true identity - and that’s what we have been celebrating in the baptism this morning. The moment is coming soon when our true nature as children of God will be revealed before all creation.

But just as we struggle in this current age with a tension between spirit and flesh, so the whole of creation is in a time of struggle too. And the reason is given to us in verse 20: “For creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but on account of him who did the subjecting, in hope”. Here we have the idea that creation has been dragged into futility as a result of the fall of Adam; not willingly, but against its will. As a result of Adam’s sin, creation has been made futile. But what does that mean?

It means that the object itself – in this case, creation - does not work as it was supposed to do. It was designed by God to work one way but actually is unable to achieve its true purpose as a result of Adam’s sin. And so salvation is not just for human beings: salvation is for the whole created order, verse 21: “Because creation also itself will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.”

God’s plan for the salvation of the world will finally be revealed when our true nature as children of God is made manifest and the whole of creation will be healed and become fit for purpose once more. Paul is saying, “Yes, there is a tension but it will soon be over…you are not alone – the whole of creation groans with you in frustration but soon, very soon, creation will be renewed and your body will be redeemed”.

That is such good news and it is so encouraging!

And so Paul is then able to make this definitive statement in verse 24: “In hope, we are saved.” We are saved – it is a statement of fact: “In hope, we are saved”. But our salvation is still related to hope because it has not been fully revealed yet: if it had been fully revealed, we wouldn’t need hope, as Paul says here. We are saved – that is a fact: but now we wait in hope for the revelation of that; a revelation that, as Paul reminded us in verse 18, is not far away now.

That being the case, we come to this crucial verse, verse 25: “But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly await it with patience.” Yes, there is a tension between flesh and spirit. Yes, we groan in our experience. Yes, we experience frustration as a result of that tension. And yet Paul says that we wait in this current situation with patience.

So here’s the thing…

I think Paul is freeing us up from the need to feel guilty or be anxious in our groaning. Of course, this tension is a real pain for us: we get things right and we get things wrong. But it’s just the way it is, it’s reality, it’s how we are. And so there’s no point struggling against it, there’s no point beating ourselves up. We just need to wait patiently…

And here’s the difference that the Christian faith can bring, I think that, through our faith, we can be set free from guilt and anxiety about who we are. Without the Christian faith, we would look at our current frustrations and perhaps become despondent about our lack of discipline, or we might develop low self-esteem or even self-hatred. But what the Christian faith offers us is a new perspective on our present frustrations. We don’t look at ourselves from where we are now. Instead, we look at ourselves from our end point, our goal, where we are heading to.

In a sense, the Christian faith gives us the opportunity to look back at ourselves: to stand firm in a heavenly perspective and look back to where we are at today.

So my perspective on life changes. Yes, I have messed things up in my life - but I am not useless, I am not feeble, I am not a waste of space. My true reality is that I am glorious child of God, redeemed and loved. It’s just that my true nature hasn’t been revealed yet and, whilst I wait patiently for it to be revealed, I will fail to keep my life in a perpetual state of self-discipline.

But I am not defined by my failures. I am defined as being a child of God. And my failures and weaknesses are just a temporary state of being whilst I wait patiently.

And so this idea of hope becomes crucial for us, but not as some pie-in-the-sky “I hope I am saved”. Hope is crucial for us because it gives us a fresh perspective on where we are at now. Quite simply, we are not defined by our current weakness. We are defined by our future glory and hope enables us to have that perspective and understanding of ourselves. Ultimately, you are a glorious child of God, not a failure. And the more you grasp that truth, the more you will begin to act like a glorious child of God, not a failure, and so you will become what you hope for!

And so we live out the present, frustrating experience with patience and hope, not self-loathing and despair. And, as we do that, we gain an increasing awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Paul draws our attention to this in verse 26: “In the same way also the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit itself intercedes on our behalf with inarticulate groans.”

Paul is saying that, in our weakness, we don’t even know what we should be praying for, let alone find the words to say…

And that is the truth, isn’t it? We look around us at the world, at all the wars and strife and anxiety and poverty, we look at our families and friends and their current struggles, we look at ourselves, our weaknesses, our failings, our fears, and we say, “Lord, I don’t know where to start”. But Paul says, “That’s OK – you don’t need to know where to start: the Spirit will do it for you”. We don’t need to select the right topics to pray about, we don’t need to carry the weight of the responsibility of that choice as Paul says, “We do not know what to pray for as we should…”

In our weakness and frailty, we can just sit silently before God and let the Spirit do the interceding for us.

How liberating is that?

God knows how weak we are, and he will do all the work for us: not just some of the work – finding the words but all of the work – finding the topic of prayer for us too.

And as an aside, we remember that Paul was in Corinth when he wrote this letter - and Corinth was the church that was big on charismatic experience and the gift of tongues and hyped up worship. Corinth was the place where they equated charismatic worship with the presence of the Spirit: if you weren’t caught up in the charismatic experience, you weren’t in touch with God. But here is Paul, sitting in Corinth, writing that actually the reverse is more often true: being in the presence of the Holy Spirit is characterised by silence and an awareness of our own weakness and inability to pray. And I find that a really liberating concept and very, very affirming indeed.

So, in our weakness and in our frailty and failings, nothing is wasted, nothing is ultimately futile. As Paul reminds us in verse 28: “And we know that for those who love God everything contributes towards good for those who are called according to his purpose”.

That’s not saying that we need to find good in everything that happens: that is poor theology and often leads to some rather sick pastoral care. You’ve probably come across examples in your own life where Christians have tried to find God for you in some awful thing that is happening. But we don’t need to find God in everything that happens…

What Paul is saying here is that, when we look back at the whole tapestry of life, we will see that everything has contributed towards good for us. It doesn’t mean that every thread of the tapestry of life has been good but that, in totality, the tapestry of life is good.

And, as Paul reminds us in verses 29 and 30, we are being conformed to the image of Christ so that we might be glorified. All the good that happens, all the bad that happens, when you add it all up and put the threads of the tapestry together the picture is of growing conformity to the image of Christ. A resurrected, glorified Christ – not a crucified Jesus of Nazareth. And so the image that we are being made into is a glorified, resurrected image – not a crucified one.

And so Paul concludes with this victory cry in verses 31-39. And he begins with the rhetorical question: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

And the answer, of course, is not “No-one” - because the trials and sufferings of life indicate that many are against us; either other people or just the cruel circumstances of life. Paul’s point is one of comparison. In comparison to God, those who are against us are not worth a thing. Even Satan cannot take away the glorious future, which is ours in Christ Jesus: verse 33: “Who will bring charges against the elect of God?” verse 34: “Who is there to condemn?” No attempt of Satan, no bitter circumstance of life is enough to separate us from God and Paul says in verse 37: “But is all these things we prevail completely through him who loved us”.

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That is the glory of the Christian message. We might live in a time of tension. We might struggle with the tension between body and spirit. We might be weak, we might constantly get it wrong. We might fail to live up to our own standards. We might be rubbish at prayer, not even knowing what to pray for, let alone find the words. But nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, live in the tension. Just accept the frustration of your inabilities and weaknesses. Don’t fight them, don’t be anxious, don’t hate yourself - because nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

You have been saved – and your hope is in the revealing of that fact in the near future. And the more you live in the light of that hope, the more your present reality will be transformed and the more you will be conformed to the image of the resurrected and glorified Christ.

This is the good news of the Gospel.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen to that!