

Suffering and Glory - Romans 8: 18-28
Sunday 10th May 2020
Prayers by Julian Providence, Talk by Jon Poole

Good Morning and welcome to St John's online morning reflection. I trust you have had a good week. Today we are looking into the book of Romans for our passage, before we do so, Julian is going to lead us in our prayers for this week.

Prayers – Julian

Thank you that you are with us all as the church of St John's this morning. That though we are separated by physical distance we remain bound in the unity of your Holy Spirit. Lord we ask that as we spend time in your presence this morning, or at whatever time we are listening to these recordings, that you fill our hearts and minds with the knowledge of your love and care for us. Help us to use this time to draw closer to you and to trust you knowing that you watch over us and care for us and that you are our very present help in these times of difficulty.

We pray for our church family.

We pray for Val Beckway with thanks that she was able to have her surgery and return home. We continue to ask that you would watch over her leg and ask you to heal and ease any pain she might feel.

Thank you so much for bringing Yvette safely through her infection. Please also aid healing of her body as it recovers from the illness. We ask for you to continue to be with Yvette and her family as they continue to grieve the death of her mother.

We also lift Emma and her family before you after losing her sister Nikki. Please comfort them in the pain of this loss and we also remember Nikki's husband and 2 sons that you would keep them close to one another and help them to grieve.

We ask for Anthony Wedderburn's continued healing of his mind. Thank you for Nigel who so faithfully visited him over many months and for the doctors, support staff and other professionals who have been caring for him. We ask that you would speak into Anthony's mind and calm any troubled thoughts he might have.

We thank you so much for how you have shown your faithful love to St John's since our building had to close.

We thank you for the donations to food bank that have fed needy families over the past few weeks. Thank you for providing for us so that we can meet the needs of others and we pray that just as the jar of oil didn't run out as long as there were jars to fill so you would do the same for those of us in need.

Thank you for Christians Against Poverty that they are continuing to be able to provide debt counselling by phone. Lord would you aid this process and make it work. Please sustain Rachael, Gareth and Lin as CAP staff. We asked for you to move any obstacles to their ability to work effectively during these difficult times and that they get the information and resources they need to do their work. We lift up those who are weighed down under debt, brought to our attention by email - in South Norwood, Selhurst, Anerley and Catford. Help them sustain the debt plans that have been devised for them. Please release them from debt and into the hope of eternal life with you.

Thank you for all the hard work that has gone on at St John's behind the scenes over the past few weeks that have sustained us as a church. Please continue to inspire and sustain those who are able to serve in this way. Lord help us all to find ways to look after one another. Bring to our minds those we could contact to offer support and help us to show the same love and care that you have shown for the people of St John's.

We pray for our government as we edge towards the easing of restrictions in coming weeks. For our government and for governments across the world, now begins the difficult task of how to rebuild societies, economies, fund and organise public services and to ensure the most vulnerable are protected. So we cry out to you, asking for your wisdom and strong guidance to be on our government and scientists as they make these incredibly difficult decisions.

The death rate from coronavirus has been devastating and many countless family and friends are left grieving loved ones. We thank you that in many countries now the pandemic is subsiding. Thank you for defending the world from the worst of this crisis. Lord please come and heal the nations and help us to rebuild.

Psalm 46:1 - 4 says:

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the Earth give way the mountains fall into of the sea,

though it's waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells."

Lord, the mountains that our society had come to rely upon have been shaken and we are reminded of the fragility and temporary nature of this world. Lord, help us to maintain trust in you through all the changes that are to come. Jesus, you are the same yesterday, today and forever so in you we have a sure and unchanging hope with you now to eternity. Thank you for giving your life secure us this hope. Help us at this time to renew our trust and hope in you and not in the passing things of this life and help us as your redeemed people to share our hope with this world in so much need.

*We ask these things in the name of your Son, Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen.***

Our reading today is from Romans, chapter 8 verses 18-28...

¹⁸ 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. 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.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

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

I'm going to start today reading a passage from my favourite book, The Lord of the Rings. I have read this passage in church before, however, when preparing for this talk it seemed to ring true once more.

"Drawing a deep breath they passed inside. In a few steps they were in utter and impenetrable dark. Not since the lightless passages of Moria had Frodo or Sam known such darkness, and if possible here it was deeper and denser. There were airs moving, and echoes, and a sense of space. Here the air was still, stagnant, heavy, and sound fell dead. They walked as it were in a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself that, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and of forms and of any light faded out of thought. Night always had been, and always would be, and night was all."

Frodo and Sam have just entered the lair of Shelob, a monstrous evil spider. They have been tasked with taking the ring of power to the heart of Mordor so it can be thrown into the depths of Mount Doom and be destroyed. This task was given to them by the council of Elrond and their guide for a while was Gandalf. The path they took was not easy and it led them to places which had seen no light for many years. They were, at times, utterly alone in the dark. They had lost their guide, lost their friends and now it seemed they had reached the end. The dark was so encumbering that it was a struggle to go on. What the Hobbits did not know, was that miles away the friends they had lost were fighting hard to make their path easier. But at that moment, they could not have known that and they probably wanted to lie down in the dark and give up.

Right now it feels like we are in a similar position to Frodo and Sam. We do not know what is going to happen, we are cut off from our friends and family. What is the point of continuing? When will this time of isolation end and what will we find when it eventually does?

Those in the early church probably had similar thoughts. They were persecuted at times, they possibly felt alone and separated from their friends and family because they chose to follow Jesus. Why did they not just give up at that point? What is it that keeps us all going? Hope! Hope for what is to come.

For those of you who know me, you know that I am a big Star Wars fan, which has nothing to do with this talk, but it was Star Wars day last Monday so thought I would drop it in. But I am also a big Liverpool fan. Before and after

every match the fans sing, 'You'll Never Walk Alone,' the words of which start like this...

*When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone*

Why do we have hope? Why, when things seem so strange do we walk on with Hope in our hearts?

In September 1988, Hurricane Gilbert hit the Louisiana coast. At that time it was considered the "Storm of the century." It battered the shoreline, severely disrupting the shrimping business. Many shrimp boats were lost, causing great concern for several families dependent on shrimping for their livelihood.

On the morning news I watched an interview with a shrimp boat owner. He was asked how the storm would impact the shrimpers. With the devastation of Gilbert as a backdrop, this man said, "well, there is a good side. The storm will have stirred up the bottom of the ocean, making for better shrimping once we're able to get back out there." This man understood hope!

Our passage today talks of hope, but it also talks of suffering and often the two go together.

In spite of sufferings, Christians are to live in the hope of Glory to come!

That is the hope we have, the hope which we live for, the hope of eternal life.

But what about these sufferings that Christians will face?

Romans 8:19-23 gives a commentary on these sufferings. According to God, is the universe and everything in it evolving to be better and better? – No!

We are told that the entire creation of God is eagerly waiting for God's revelation! The whole of creation is frustrated with the bondage of decay!

The whole of creation is groaning with pain!

To the eye of the biologist, nature is cyclical. The seasons come and go and come again. Animals and plants are born give birth, then die. On and on and round and round. Just as Elton John wrote in the opening song for the Lion King. It's the Circle of Life...and it moves us all!

But to the eye of faith and hope, history is not cyclical but linear and full of hope. Paul likens the creation to the woman who welcomes the birth contractions as the sign that the long-awaited birth is near. Nature is not going around and round in an impersonal, meaningless and endless cycle, says Paul, but is 'almost human, straining forward to see the sons of God revealed and the restoration of nature as a New Eden.

And so, what about us and our sufferings? Look again at v23:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

Just like the rest of God's creation, Christians also eagerly wait for God's revelation, are frustrated with the bondage of decay (our physical bodies are dying), and groan with the pains of life on earth. These sufferings are real for all Christians, even though bound for heaven for eternity! Doesn't sound good? Remember Romans 8:18; no suffering on earth can compare to the glory we will have!

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Christians have hope and are to live with this hope from God that we are saved, are being saved, and will be completely saved!

Christians have hope but it is not the same hope as we would define it in general. The Christian's hope is not the same as in "I hope I will be happy someday!" You see, the original Greek word for hope in Romans 8 is *elpizo*, which means expected or anticipated! Heaven is real and Jesus will come again.

Our hope for an end to the current situation is hope in the short term however, we are also blessed with a long term hope of eternal glory.

This is the call to true faith of those who are already 'children of God' and who live in the painful intermediate time between their baptism into Christ and the arrival of the coming age.

The eye of faith and hope sees through the current pain and suffering and gives us confidence in the sovereignty of God, which in dire circumstances is one of the fundamentals of the faith. It is one thing – and very necessary to assent to the great historical facts of the gospel as touching the birth of Christ, his miracles, atoning death, resurrection from the dead and return in glory. But, having confidence in God's sovereign goodness in the midst of a baffling and painful providence is equally important, if not more so.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who^[1] have been called according to his purpose.

The thing about the Liverpool anthem, You'll never walk alone, is that the fans sing it whether we win or lose. I've heard it sung at times of great joy, like after the Barcelona semi-final last season, or when a player missed a penalty in a shoot-out which cost the team a game and I've also heard it sung at half time in the 2005 final when Liverpool were losing 3-0 (although we eventually won that one). The sentiment is the same for us.

Walk on, with hope in your heart and you will never walk alone. How can we walk alone when God is on our side?

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

I am going to finish today by saying the words of the apostle's creed. For as we have faith that our hope lies in eternal life, let us declare that faith together. Feel free to say it with me or listen and pray the words in your heart.

APOSTLES CREED

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.**

**On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.**

Amen.

Before I finish with a blessing, I thought it would be great to song together. If you know it please sing along, if you do not then please listen. This song is called Cornerstone and simply says...

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly trust is Jesus' name

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all

I pray that you have a great week.

A final blessing...

May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields

and, until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand

Amen