

**SERMON – 2/12/18****Advent Words: Hope**

Romans 8:18-27

‘For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth.’ (Romans 8:22)

And so here we are at the beginning of Advent. The world is already well and truly immersed in the frenzy of Christmas and the church will soon be sucked in too, but today at least we pause to wait and listen and look up beyond the here and now to reflect on what it is all about, to share in bread and wine and in the dying and rising again of Christ our Saviour.

During Advent we will be taking four words as our focus – hope, peace, joy and love – as we prepare to celebrate again the Christmas Good News of the Child in the manger who is God with us. Advent is a time for comparing the now and the not yet of our faith, the things that are already ours in Christ and the things which are promised to us for the future, and that contrast is brought into clear focus for us in the morning's reading where two words stand out – hope and groans.

Three times in this morning's reading, the apostle writes about groaning – all of creation groans with pain (v.22)... we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves (v.23)... and the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express (v.26). I think we would all recognise groaning as a pretty widespread experience in our world. We live in a groaning world where wars and disasters and the results of human interaction at all levels leave a trail of suffering. We are part of a groaning church which is constantly striving and often failing to be what it should be. We are groaning individuals who are caught up in a multiplicity of struggles. We groan, we yearn for something better.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul has painted a picture of a world which has turned its back on God and which has descended into anarchy, bringing down upon itself the wrath of the Creator, but having proclaimed the bad news about the state of the world he has gone on to announce the good news, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, bearing the punishment that we deserved, reconciling us to the Father again, clothing us with His righteousness and imparting to us that life which can never die. But here we begin to see the gap that exists

between the now and the not yet – our citizenship is in heaven but for the time being we are still resident here in this world and continue to live with the reality and consequences of human sin, our own and that of others.

Now, this passage that we have read this morning, and indeed the whole of chapter 8 of Romans, is worthy of prolonged study and if you are looking for something to ponder during Advent then just spend some time each day reflecting on these verses. But let me take a few moments here today to open up this one now-and-not-yet theme of groaning and hope.

First of all Paul writes about the creation being 'condemned to lose its purpose' – the same kind of condemnation he writes about of himself as he feels unable to fulfil his potential as a child of God. What he is pointing out is that the whole world was affected by humanity's fall into sin and our coming under the judgement of God. He doesn't just mean that because human beings sin, for example by using too much plastic, that the oceans and grass verges get clogged up with acres of rubbish and animals and birds and fish suffer and die as a result. He means that the whole of nature is in a fallen state – in the words of one commentator, "Death stalks the world and there is much decay and trouble even within the order of nature." The bad news is much worse than we first imagined – it's not just humanity that is subject to the judgement of God but the whole world over which we have been given dominion in time. When you stop to think about it, that explains an awful lot. It explains why, if something can go wrong it will go wrong and why even what is unexpected will suddenly happen – earthquake, flash flood, wild fire – anything you care to imagine. The world is broken – it's bad news.

But what Paul goes on to say is that the Good News of Christ is also much more extensive than we might have thought. It is not just humanity that is redeemed but the whole creation. There is a 6<sup>th</sup> century hymn which I love – Sing, my tongue, how glorious battle glorious victory became. It sings of Christ's victory on the Cross, how the Redeemer overcame for us, but in it there is also this remarkable line: From His patient body pierced, blood and water streaming fall, Earth and sea and stars and mankind by that stream are cleansed all.' The whole creation is redeemed through Christ – this broken world is mended. Not yet, mind – just like Paul and all of us who are in Christ struggling to be a saint in the body of a sinner, the world must struggle on yet awhile, but the groaning, the earthquakes, the floods, the

fire, that are an audible representation of that struggle are not futile. There is hope. Paul describes it as 'groaning with pain, like the pain of childbirth' – it's a very particular groaning, the intense labour that issues forth in the joy of new life. "Creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God." (vv.20-21) One day there will be a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth will have passed away – there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things will have passed away.

And that, I think, gives us a clue as to how to interpret the other two groanings we read about – Paul continues: "It is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free." Just as the world is in turmoil, so the Christian Church, the fellowship of the redeemed on earth, is not as it should be – it is torn apart by disputes, it is often ineffectual in its fulfilment of the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all peoples; it is too worldly in its standards. The bad news is that the Church is groaning too, but the good news is that it is not groaning without a purpose – it too is groaning as in the pain of childbirth. We proclaim our faith in the resurrection of the body – our eternal future is not some amorphous, ghostly, out of body existence but a bodily resurrection to a life free from all that holds us back in these broken earthly bodies. The groaning of the church on earth is heralding the way for the new Jerusalem that is coming down out of heaven from God, heralding the way for the time when it will be said, 'Now the dwelling of God is with people and He will live with them. They will be His people and He will be their God.' I read this morning that today the Presbyterian Church in war-torn Aleppo in Syria will be re-opened and dedicated. Even in the midst of our communal groaning as a church, in the fellowship of faith, the work goes on – that is our hope.

And thirdly, the apostle helps us here in our understanding of what it is to be a follower of Jesus – weak and ineffectual, wavering in faith and incapable in our own strength of being what we want to be for God, but on the road to a sure and certain future, a hope that does not depend on our ability to achieve but that depends on the promises of God. Paul writes: "*We* do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God

for us in groans that words cannot express.” (v.26) The groaning of the believer in prayer may often seem like a frustrating activity, an impatient yearning for the fulfilment of the promises of God, but don't let's ever despise the struggle that is prayer, for a prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit is also a groaning as in the pains of childbirth, very far from being a fruitless exercise – rather a struggle with a purpose, a growing conformity to the mind of Christ, a drawing near to the perfection that God purposed in the very beginning.

There is a bookmark for everyone here today. Printed on it is the simple Advent prayer that we said together as we lit the first of our advent candles – it's a prayer of longing that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem will be born in us this Christmas and that there will be blessing for our community and our nation and our world. We will be using it during these next weeks at church services and other events but I would like to ask you each to use it day by day, perhaps when you get up in the morning and when you go to bed at night, perhaps as you sit down to eat, perhaps if you have an advent calendar as you open each door. Let us ask God to raise the spiritual temperature of our lives and of our community this Christmas and to build our hope in Christ. There are plenty bookmarks for you to take as a little gift for a friend as well. Let us share our conviction that it is through Christ alone that there will be true peace on earth. Perhaps giving a bookmark may open up for you a conversation, an opportunity to invite someone to one of the Christmas services. Many folk would love to come to church at Christmas but don't feel they can just turn up. What if you asked someone if they would like to come with you? There is such a variety of services, something to suit everyone.

Hope is the gift of God to each believer, to the Church as a whole and to the world at large. We may think that we see too much groaning around us – a suffering world, a struggling church, a weak faith – but the insight that we are given here is that groaning is giving way to a whole new order, the order that is the harvest that comes from the sowing of the seed of the Gospel in the world. “I consider that what we suffer at this present time, writes Paul, cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children.” (vv.18-19) Just think on that. This is good news. The awfulness of flood and earthquake and fire and disease, the suffering that comes from greed and selfishness simply cannot be compared with the

glory that is going to be revealed. The struggles that have dogged the Church down through the ages and that are no less obvious in our own day cannot be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed. The weakness and failure that characterises our very human attempts at Christian discipleship cannot be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed. It's not now; it's not yet, but there is hope.

Pray, give, invite, and step by step, moment by moment, person by person God's Kingdom will come.