

SERMON – 12/9/21**'The Redemption of Creation'**

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)

Over these last weeks we have been reflecting on our stewardship of creation at a time when the climate emergency is constantly before us not only because of the COP26 global conference soon to be held in Glasgow but also because of the news we regularly hear of forest fires and hurricanes and earthquakes all across the globe and the struggles these things bring to people just like us. This weekend too, as our thoughts have been particularly focussed on the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the tidal wave of repercussions that followed from it in the lives of individuals and nations, the question of why there is such suffering in the world is, for many people, one of the greatest obstacles that stands in the way of their putting their faith in God. How can we make sense of all that happens in this broken world and what message does the Gospel have to speak into the brokenness not just of individual lives and of human society but of the whole created order?

I have entitled this morning's sermon 'The Redemption of Creation' because that is what the Good News of Christ offers, but I might more evocatively have entitled it 'Groaning' instead. Three times in the verses we read the apostle Paul speaking about groaning: in v.22, “all of creation groans with pain;” in v.23, “we who have the Spirit of God also groan inwardly” and in v.26; “the Spirit Himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express.” Groaning – it’s a most apt word to use. We live in a groaning world where ice-caps and deserts and weather-systems are in chaos, where wars and disasters and the consequences of human sin and greed leave a trail of suffering of which the collapse of the Twin Towers is just one terrible example. We are part of a groaning church which is constantly striving to be what it should be but often failing. We are groaning individuals who do not know how we ought to pray but who so yearn for God to set us free.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul paints a picture of a world which has turned its back on God and which has descended into anarchy, bringing

upon itself the anger of God. Having proclaimed the bad news about the state of the world, though, he trumpets the good news – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though we as Christians have been freed from sin’s *condemnation*, we are not immune from sin’s *consequences*, and in today’s passage Paul explores the unbalancing effect that human sin has in creation as a whole.

Like so many of the big creation themes we have looked at in recent weeks, our passage this morning really demands far more time than we are able to devote to it. I commend this whole chapter to you in your devotional reading but for now let’s home in on the verses we read.

Firstly, Paul speaks about creation being ‘in slavery to decay’ (v.21). It’s a very good way to describe the way things are in the world, and I think it’s a crucial point to grasp if we are to understand what the Bible has to say about the reason for the existence of suffering in the world. The whole world was affected by humanity’s fall into sin and our coming under the judgement of God – and Paul doesn’t just mean that there is suffering in the world because humans cause it. Certainly you can say that there was suffering in New York City and in Washington DC on 9/11 because of the conscious (and evil) decisions of a few; but we also need to consider the tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of lives that were lost in Afghanistan and in other places because of the way the world responded to the atrocity. We also need to consider that people are suffering today in the slums of Nairobi and Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro because people like us in Kinross have much more than we need. If all of us in the developed world were willing to give up even some of our material wealth and take a cut in our standard of living, there *would* be more than enough to go round – that’s true. But that in itself wouldn’t solve the problem and nothing that we can do by our human efforts could ever stop volcanoes from erupting and earthquakes from causing devastation. What the Bible teaches is that the whole of nature is in a fallen state. The bad news is actually much worse than we first imagined – it’s not just human beings who are under the curse of God but the whole world over which human beings have been given dominion. In the words of one commentator that I came across this week: “Death stalks the world and there is much decay and trouble, even within the order of nature.”

But the good news that is in Christ is also much more extensive than we first might think. It is not just humanity that is redeemed, but the whole creation – this is a theme that is much loved in the tradition of Celtic Christianity but it is also evident in the 6th century Latin hymn *Pange lingua* (Sing, my tongue). It contains these lines: “From Christ’s holy body broken, Blood and water forth proceed: Earth and stars and sky and ocean, by that flood from stain are freed.” The whole creation is part of the redemption. Not yet, mind. The world must struggle on a while yet. But the groaning that is the audible representation of that struggle is not futile. Paul describes it as being like the groaning of childbirth – it is a very particular groaning, the intense pain that nonetheless issues forth in the joy of new life, what the apostle calls here ‘the glorious freedom of the children of God’ (v. 21). One day, the Bible tells us, 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 gone. We’ll be thinking about that, God-willing, next Sunday.

And that, I think, gives us the clue we need to interpret the other two groanings that we read about. “All of creation groans with pain...but it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit of God also groan inwardly 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 is not what it should be – it is torn apart by disputes, it is often ineffectual in its fulfilment of the Great Commission and its calling to seek first the Kingdom of God; it is too worldly in its standards. The bad news is that the Church is groaning too, and yet the Church too is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. Our faith proclaims: ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body.’ Our eternal future is not some amorphous, ghostly, out-of-body experience, but a bodily resurrection, a new birth. 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 God’s home is with human beings! He will live with them and they shall be His people and He will be their God.’

For finally, we are helped in our understanding of what it is to be a Christian believer – weak and ineffectual, wavering in our 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. “*We* do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit Himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express.” 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 us ever despise the struggle that is prayer, for a prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit is also a groaning as in the pain of childbirth, very far from being a fruitless exercise but rather a struggle with a purpose, a growing conformity to the mind of Christ, a drawing near to take hold of the perfection that God intended in the very beginning but that we threw back in His face.

And *that* is why it is more appropriate to entitle this sermon 'The Redemption of Creation' and not 'Groaning'. Paul writes: “I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal His children.”

Let redemption be our motivation as individuals and as a church in all that we do in Christ’s name. A glorious freedom is held out not only to you and me, but also to those in Kinross and across the world who as yet have not discovered what it means to trust in Christ, and to those who suffer for one reason or another.

This is the Gospel of Christ – things need not be as they are at present; don’t let’s *ever* be satisfied with the world as it is. Our groaning is not without purpose; there is a glorious freedom to proclaim and it’s our responsibility in Christ not only to proclaim it but also to play our part in bringing to the ‘now’ what is ‘not yet.’

Let our response at this time of heightened awareness of the climate crisis be not only to *hear* the Word of God but to *do* it. Let it be to take action (perhaps more dramatically than we have ever done before); let it be to give (to share more generously than we have ever done before); and let it be to pray (to call upon God perhaps more faithfully and fervently than we have ever done before) in order to play our part in God's purpose of redeeming creation and of ending suffering. And let's see what God will bring to birth.