

## Reflection on 19 July 2020

David Fotheringham,  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston

**Bible readings (read these first):** Romans 8: 18-25  
Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

### Prayer

Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Many people recognise Romans chapter 8 as being the most beautiful, hopeful, expressive and reassuring chapter in all of Paul's writing – and for good reason. This is the chapter which includes the assurance that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus – neither death nor life, height or depth, hardship or powers or sword: nothing can separate us from God's love. Chapter 8 also has words about how the Holy Spirit prays within us - even when we ourselves don't know how to pray - sometimes with sighs too deep for words. And it has the remarkable passage that we heard just now that not only we, but the whole creation, groan like being in labour pain ahead of the glory which is to come. Paul writes that he considers that "the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."

These comments actually reflect back on the beginning of a whole sweep of argument in Romans that begins in chapter 5. There, Paul starts with three affirmations: firstly, that we have peace with God through Jesus, because God has initiated our redemption and our hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus; secondly, that we suffer now, which I'll unpack a bit in a moment; and thirdly, that we have hope, which does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So in those three affirmations there's an element of what has been done and what is to come: the death and resurrection of Christ have happened and have established our hope in the future; and in the present the Holy Spirit is gifted to us to lead and empower our hope and our service.

At the time of the writing of this letter Christians had not long previously been expelled from Rome – at least, most likely, the Jewish ones were; and then when they returned the non-Jewish Christians – the Gentile Christians – had moved into the land and were effectively running the church there, leading to an interesting situation. Different expressions of Christian faith all growing in the same field. It's starting to sound like what we heard from Matthew's handbook for the church, where you have different plants growing in the field, which God can sort out in good time. That was challenging, but there was a bigger problem at large, because in that society Christians were still viewed with suspicion at best, or as a threat at worst, and treated accordingly by the machinery of the state, even when they were seeking to work for peace and for good. There were lots of times in Christian history when Christians had to lay low, and when they have faced – and do face – real suffering.

That does not phase Paul. After all, he is a disciple of Jesus, and while Jesus had been raised from death, the first-fruits of the resurrection, Paul is under no illusion that all had been made right in the world or that followers of the crucified one would now get a free ride in life. And so, in fact, at the beginning of this whole argument in Romans he writes that he finds some good in suffering because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character leads to hope. And that hope, he writes, does not disappoint because through the Holy Spirit God's love and promise is gifted to us.

So he's introduced that idea in chapter 5, and in this remarkable passage in chapter 8 he expands that thought to encompass so much more. Because it is not just us humans who suffer, and who long for redemption and renewal. Paul ties our personal groaning with the groaning of the whole creation.

How truly he could have been writing in our time. How truly does this reflect the groaning that we see so clearly. As we are conscious of suffering around the world, in countries both rich and poor, and as we ourselves deal with the inconveniences and the serious challenges of living through lockdowns and quarantines, we can see the planet as a whole taking a breath while we briefly pull back on our consumption of jet fuel and on the pollution of air and water. And we may be fortunate to have a few more moments to notice the birds, to appreciate the trees where we can walk, the wind along the coastline, the fresh air without the smog. All of this creation longs with us for the hope which is to come.

And like the ecosystem where you cannot pull out weeds without affecting the wheat, in this current environment we might be prompted to pay more attention to how we are all linked together. Poor housing conditions for vulnerable people impacts back on the whole of society; and we can see clearly how differently resourced people are able to navigate this time differently. We cannot ignore our responsibilities in shaping policies and in our own practices of generosity in responding to the needs of the vulnerable. And indeed, that is where Paul's letter to the Romans will go in the latter few chapters of the letter.

Here, in today's reading, we are invited to pay attention to the whole of God's creation – to the garden God calls us to tend, among wheat and weeds and all kinds of plants - the environment and society in all of its facets.

If we look at the literal words of Paul's text, he says that creation "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" – why? Why would the creation wait with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God? It can only be because the children of God are those who will care for it, as opposed to subjecting it to decay.

So when we notice the birds, appreciate the trees and stand in awe of the coastline, we might hear creation's call – its longing for God's children who will care. And that longing is based in hope, a sure hope, because God has promised it, in us. In us, and for us, for the good of all the world, and the glory of God that we cannot yet see which is to come.

Amen.