

Minster, 10.30 HC, Sun July 17th 2011 – 4th after Trinity

Readings: Isaiah 44:6-8; Rom 8:12-25; Matt 13.24-30, 36-43

Theme: Living a life of hope led by the Spirit

Aims: To intro and put in context the sermon series; to examine the themes in Rom 8:12-25 = life led by the spirit & vision of hope for all creation!

You may have read in last week's notice sheet that over the next few weeks we will be following the Lectionary readings from Paul's letter to the Romans in our parish communion services. We will be reading selected passages from chapters 8 to 12, today being chapter 8 verses 12 to 25.

Today, I'd like to put this series of sermons into context to set the scene – with a brief overview of Romans and then of Ch 8 in particular, before looking at the passage for today.

Last Friday, the Italian parliament in Rome passed a package of measures to prevent it becoming the next European country to be hit by a debt crisis. Rome today is still the capital of Italy, as it was in the 1st century when the apostle Paul was writing to the small Roman church. Today it has 2.7 million inhabitants; in the 1st century it had 1 million – still huge by standards of the time.

Today when you go to Rome as a tourist, you can step inside 1st century buildings and burial grounds; you can walk on 1st century tiled floors and look out of their windows (not onto much, mind you – they're all underground!).

Walking outside along 21st c. streets, you are practically tripping up over bits of history – stones that have been excavated and left lying in piles everywhere. History is all around you!

Imagine if you can, what Rome was like in the 1st century AD. It was smaller, of course, but people were living in those buildings we can now visit. Most people were poor “and lived in large tenement houses, some as tall as six storeys” although the rich did occupy villas. It was a cosmopolitan place – there was a substantial Jewish community (of between 20 to 20K people) and a growing Christian presence. There were enough Christians for the Emperor Nero to blame them for the fire of AS 64 which engulfed the city.

Paul didn't found the church in Rome and at the time of writing his letter, he hadn't visited it. You can see though that Paul wants to visit them, and is writing possibly to win their support for a further visit to Spain (15:28-31). He also felt a

pastoral responsibility for Gentile Christians, as one called to bring them the gospel.

Unlike many of his other letters to early churches, this one was not written in response to a crisis; it isn't part of a conversation he's having with them; and it doesn't address any particular problems that the church is having.

It's a single, extended theological argument and is said by some to be "the consummate expression of his mature theology". In other words, it's what he believed;

it's Paul's working out of what God had done in Jesus, particularly regarding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. You can see him working it out – what has God done? Has he abandoned the Jews because they have rejected Jesus? And how are Gentiles to relate to God when they don't follow the Jewish law?

Today's passage is about what it means to be a Christian – it's a big vision – and includes a glimpse at the whole of God's plan.

It divides into 2 sections: 12-17 and 18-25.

Both are in the middle of a longer section in which Paul is discussing the relationship between the requirements of the

Jewish law and the experience of living with the power of God's Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of Chapter 8, Paul contrasts "living in the flesh" with "living in the Spirit". His use of the word "flesh" means not just physical matter, but being hostile to God, giving in to idolatry, living without wanting any relationship with God.

Verse 12 then begins with the word "So," –

"So then, brothers and sister, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live by the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live...You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption."

Paul tells us that living by the Spirit of God will bring us life.

We say in our communion service, "The Lord is here; his Spirit is with us". We can ask for a filling of the Holy Spirit at any time; whether we have received him before or whether it's for the first time. And having received him, we can then know God as a loving parent. We can stop living 'in the flesh' with our backs to God.

Paul goes on, in verse 15: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

After receiving the Spirit, Gentiles have the same inheritance as the Jews, because they are adopted into God’s family. We can know God as our loving parent; we can cry out to him in childish words that betray our closeness to him; we can know his love because we, too, are his children.

When looking for new parents for adopted children, adoption agencies look for an unwavering commitment, for mature people who can offer a stable and secure environment to the child. This is just what God offers us.

The unconditional love of a good parent.

However, there’s a twist at the end of verse 17 – “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Suffering is never far from Paul’s mind.

We should not be surprised if living the Christian life is not easy – it has not been easy for generations of followers of Jesus.

This new theme forms a link into the next set of verses, 18-25. And suddenly, we are transported into a bigger picture; a vision, which puts present suffering into perspective.

Pauls says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it (*ref to Adam*), in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Suddenly, Paul brings the whole of creation into the relationship between man and God! It’s like standing on top of a mountain looking down at the view beneath. He’s alluding back to the creation accounts in Genesis, when both man and woman had to bear the consequences for disobeying God in the garden. Both would bear sufferings – pain in childbirth and the unremitting toil of work.

Paul goes on to refer to childbirth – “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; (*ie until Jesus*) and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (v 22-23)

We are living in the same times as Paul and his contemporaries – the “now but not yet” times. God’s spirit has been given, but the end of time has not yet come. The final act is yet to be played out. And in the meantime, we and all creation are groaning. We are caught in the consequences of our sin – even creation is. And suffering is the result.

We share in the pain and suffering of the world; we ourselves suffer. We do not escape it. But we can pray about it. We have a relationship with God and we are called to live by the Spirit in this life of struggle.

And then, finally, some verses which offer some rays of sunshine: (v. 24-5)

“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we wait for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Paul calls us to live with hope for the future – he believes there will be an end to current suffering; the Messiah will rule. We are called to have hope. But we can’t see, yet, what we are hoping for – that wouldn’t be hope!

So, then, Romans 8 vv 12-25 give us a glorious vision of freedom in the life of the Spirit.

This is the life of faith on offer to us!

- We can know and receive the Spirit who is active now, and who can bring us life.
- We are part of the bigger picture of creation, the whole of which is caught up in the relationship between humankind and God. We are reminded that the whole of creation groans under the weight of sin.
- But we can live a life of hope, a life led by the Spirit of God; not subject to the slavery to sin, but FREE from it.

This is what living the Christian life is all about.
Amen.