

## Reflection from Revd Andrew Haines for Trinity 7 - Romans 8: vs 26-39

This is the last of our seven-week series looking at chapters 5 - 8 of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. The final verses of the passage for today both sum up the whole four chapters, and also bring them to a glorious climax. The opening verses, though, continue our theme from last week of life in the Spirit. They have something vitally important to teach us about our present situation.

Last week I used three words to describe the nature of our fallen world: brokenness, incompleteness and frustration. These can be seen in relation to creation as a whole, to communities, the church, and in the lives of individuals. The current pandemic has caused huge disruption and fractures in so many aspects of life, and caused huge uncertainty in many ways. Lives and livelihoods have been lost on a massive scale, and there seems to be no clear way out of the situation. How should we pray at the moment? Where is God when we need Him?

Yes, it is difficult to know how to pray meaningfully at times like this. However, Paul reminds us that, as people in whom the Spirit dwells, we do not necessarily have to articulate our prayers. If we experience a deep and inexpressible inner yearning ('groaning inwardly', as Paul describes it), that is a sign of the Spirit at work within us; and God the Father, the 'Searcher of hearts', is in communion with the Spirit within us, and vice versa. In that communion our prayers are received by God, and our wills are transformed to understand and accord with His will. We can, sometimes without realising it, be engaged in a deep and powerful prayer ministry. Far from being absent, God is present with us, in the midst of the pain and uncertainty. And He has been in that place before us, in the death of His Son on the cross.

And so we come to the summary of the whole section. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." 'We know': this is a general affirmation of what Paul and the early Christian community had discovered about God's purpose for them - a purpose that has existed from before the dawn of time. Paul sets out that purpose in five stages: foreknowledge, pre-destination, calling, justification and glorification. These are big words, full of meaning, but essentially they indicate that God loves us, and has taken the initiative to draw us to Himself - an initiative centred in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God works for our good, not in the sense of promising ease and comfort, but that through every circumstance He will be with us, and bring us to share ultimately in His perfect kingdom.

Paul underlines this assertion of 'we know' with four challenging questions:

- Who is against us?
- Who will bring any charge against us?
- Who condemns us?
- Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

The answer that he gives to each question is a resounding 'NO-ONE', and he tells us why that is so. Who can be against us? Well, it could be all sorts of people and powers, but they count for absolutely nothing if God is with us. Indeed He is with us, and has demonstrated His commitment to us in the death of His Son on our behalf. He is God over all, and will complete His work in bringing us to glory with His Son.

The second and third questions take us into the realm of the law court. 'Who will bring any charge?' 'Who will condemn us?' Again, all sorts of people might try to accuse and condemn. We even sometimes do it to ourselves. But God Himself has taken the charge, and diverted the sentence. Chapter 8 begins: 'there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. Jesus took on himself the whole weight of what might otherwise have condemned us, and paid its penalty.

Lastly, who, or what, shall separate us from the love of Christ? Paul gives us a list of terrible hardships - things that might tempt us to fall away from our faith. However, all these things, and more, are things that Paul himself has

endured and survived in his own life and ministry. Through all of them, Paul's experience is that God has held on to him. We might feel that our hold on God is slipping, but His hold on us is secure.

Paul began his summary of these chapters with a general 'we know...'. He finishes with a bold 'I am convinced...' that nothing in time or space, in any realm or dimension, can separate him, or us, from the love of God. God longs for us not to be stuck at the level of general knowing, but to come to point of utter conviction, to know the blessed assurance that brings peace into any situation.