



Second Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 14 June 2020

READINGS

Genesis 18: 1-15, Psalm 116: 1-2, 11-18, Romans 5: 1-8, Matthew 9: 35 - 10: 8

Suffering, perseverance, character and hope

Paul speaks about boasting in different ways in a number of his letters. This suggests he thought it is normal for us to want to boast. Which is one of the main functions of Instagram and Facebook isn't it? The cutest baby, the fanciest meal, and, quite rightfully also the achievements and milestones that we can't keep to ourselves because we want to celebrate them.

We don't only boast to puff ourselves up and look impressive. Sometimes we are just overflowing with joy and excitement and we want everyone to share in that joy with us. The word Paul uses is also translated as "exult," or rejoice. We overflow because we can't help it. You know when people are very boastful we use the expression "They're so full of themselves"? Well Paul believed Christians would be full of God, so much so that we can't contain it inside ourselves and God would overflow from us. That's the boasting he means. Paul always turns the urge to boast upside down however, because, although we have everything to celebrate and good news to share, Paul makes it abundantly clear that this is not the result of anything we have done or earned. It's a pure kind of joy because we take no credit – all credit goes to God. By faith we experience God's grace, reconciled and at peace with God because of Jesus, alive with the certain hope of the glory of God eternal. Faith, peace, grace, hope – words worth celebrating, words that will fill us up and overflow.

And yet in this passage we can't ignore the strange attention that Paul gives to the role of suffering. He describes a very specific example of what Richard Rohr calls "living ourselves into a new way of thinking." In other words, allowing pain to do its work in us, transforming broken ruins into places of resurrection, mourning into dancing, and despair into hope. We never have to look far to find suffering but right now suffering is unavoidable. Through the media this past week we have been witness to the trauma of systemic racism in our country as well as in America. Many of our community watching today are survivors of racial violence or abuse of all kinds by people with power. In addition we all bear witness to suffering associated with the pandemic and the lockdown: loss of work, financial hardship, the suffering of the lonely and the bereaved, the fear of those who work daily and risk their lives. I should go on. No one's pain deserves to go unseen.

May I say that although God is always present to us in our suffering, and although through faith we can find meaning and see how suffering has shaped us, I could never say that God causes or allows suffering in order to accomplish his good purpose. I see Facebook posts that say, "If you saw the size of the blessing that is coming, you would understand the magnitude of the battle you are fighting." I don't think God tests us or rewards us in proportion to the pain we endure. God does not transact or traffic with human suffering. Even if it could seem as if that is what Paul is saying.

God does not abandon us. That is the promise. As we find God in the struggle, we are living ourselves into God's way of thinking. According to Paul, we can make peace with suffering because it produces perseverance. That act of endurance doesn't have to mean stoic independence. It might just be the ability to hang on until morning, or the courage to seek help, or very often it's simply because we have no choice except to get up, dress up and show up. Paul wrote that this perseverance produces character – verse 4: suffering ..., perseverance ..., character ..., hope, BUT it's not a test we have to pass so that we can earn a spiritual promotion. We all endure in our own way; we cry, we fall down, we give up ... and then by grace we keep going. It is a process happening within us through all life's cycles of highs and lows.

Father Nancarrow defines Paul's word "character" as "the development of a sense of self that can admit, but not be *dominated* by suffering." That's a lifelong journey. But as we are persevering, and our sense of self keeps growing, at the same time it is cultivating the hope that is at the heart of who we are: our peace with God; our trust that beyond suffering comes the possibility of a greater good.

Please let's not diminish this by saying, "Suffering is *good* for you because it always leads to hope," as some of us do say. What makes the progression to hope is a gift of God *already* given: love which *has been* poured out into our hearts. It is the gift of the Spirit, who *has been* given. Grace is free. But let's not ignore the Spirit's invitation to experience the contrast of hope within the contradiction of suffering. Right now, as we struggle alone and collectively, we can remain open to the work of the Holy Spirit inside us. We can allow for the hope that the suffering of now can be transformed in our "new normal" that is to come.

We can believe in and commit to creating a future that is more just, more compassionate and more connected when we emerge from the limitations of the present. By the life of the Spirit in us and in the name of the Love that has been poured out by grace into our hearts.

Amen