

All Souls' Day 2015

Our second reading this evening is about the coming victory of God's love. It is a lovely passage of scripture that is celebrated and cherished by Christians everywhere – the last part of which is read out at the beginning of all funeral services – it is a passage that moves between the earthly and the heavenly, between present and future, in a way that puzzles the reader. The message however is simple – the sufferings of this present time are simply absorbed into the overwhelming victory of God's love.

God is for us all – nothing can separate us from the love of Christ – nothing can separate us from the victory of Christ – the victory of course being the glory of the risen Lord and his resurrection on Easter Day. Paul lists all the forces that could conceivably separate us from God's love – death, life, things present, things to come, angels, rulers, powers, height, depth, anything in all creation – whatever situation we find ourselves – whether dead or alive, whether in the present or in the days to come – no spiritual force or power from the universe will be able to separate us from God's love.

The battle has been won. None of the forces listed, despite their power, can separate us from Christ Jesus. Throughout the Letter to the Romans, St Paul is writing above all - about love – God's love shown to us to by Jesus Christ.

At all times, both sad and happy, at times of anger, denial, hatred, disbelief, betrayal.... times of affliction, distress and persecution.. times of hunger, nakedness or danger... with faith we are not alone – we are never alone in those horrible times of despair.

For Christ is with us at all times, and we must never – never forget that.

Paul's conviction is highly to be praised – he reminds us all about a thing that is all too precious – something that is worth more than gold and silver – and that is HOPE – a hope that all will be well – Julian of Norwich, a famous Christian writer back in the 14th Century wrote, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.” - she had a faith that was based on a hope that nothing shall separate us from God's love.

The message is simple – the sufferings of this present time are simply absorbed into the overwhelming victory of God's love. The message is simple – that hope will not let us down. Paul tells us that we should be joyful in hope, that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we will have hope.

In the Romans passage, Paul quotes one of the psalms, 44, it is a psalm of complaint to God in the midst of suffering. – As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' The suffering, in the psalm, has come about despite the fact that Israel has been faithful. Here as in the passages in Isaiah, we find a truth deeply embedded by Jesus himself: that God will save his people, not despite their sufferings but through and even because of them. Those who believe can be sure that 'in all these things we are completely victorious through the one who loved us.'

Through the deep suffering and crying – God is with us – always – to end of the age. That's the promise at the very end of the gospel – Remember I am with you always – I love those words.

It is that love, finally, that comes back again and again as the underlying theme of this reading, of what the New Testament and all scripture is all about – it is a theme of our faith, and of our lives. It is a theme which will never end – it is endless and will never leave us. It rules victoriously over death and life alike, over powers in heaven and on earth.

Paul is convinced, and after eight chapters of Romans he might expect that we would be as well, that 'nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

All the great Christian writers throughout the ages have echoed the same theme as Paul – that is to never lose hope – hope for us all in this broken world, hope for peace, hope for pardon, hope of glory. Without Jesus Christ in our lives there is no hope.

I remember a faithful church member called Jack in my previous parish in Swansea and before he died, he told me his favourite passage from the bible. It was from Paul's letter to the Romans. The words, '*we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*' Jack was a man who persevered in prayer without giving up and it was a great joy to minister to a man who was looking forward to the promise of eternal life.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. May the God of hope fill us all with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope of the coming victory of God's love.