



Andrew Murray Pretoria
16th of August 2020
Liturgist:
Rev. Stefan Botha



† **Invocation and Greeting:**

Lord, we have heard of all
that you have done in and through the lives of your people—
through the centuries and across the world.
You have touched and changed humanity's whole way of living;
you have made us new.
We have come to worship you,
to be changed by you,
to become the people you always meant us to be.
Let it happen, Lord,
even though we are afraid of change
and resist any alteration of our way of life.
Challenge us and change us and fill us
with such an awareness of you and your presence that nothing,
not even our own hearts and lives,
can ever be the same again.

**Family of God, it is with joy that I greet you all in the Name of the Sovereign God.
I greet you in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

† **Scripture Reading and Sermon: “*God and the pandemic.*” Reading the New Testament.**

Good morning to all. We are busy with a series on “*God and the pandemic*”, based on the book of NT Wright. We started by looking at the Church's task and calling. Then we turned to the Old Testament to help us understand our life and times. Then we looked at Jesus and the Gospels. Now we look at the rest of the New Testament.

The New Testament constantly refers back, as do more or less all Jewish writings, to the great foundational events of Passover, the time when God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus himself made Passover central to his work of announcing God's kingdom, and to his vocation to go to the cross.

That is why he chose Passover to go to Jerusalem that last time, and why, in order to interpret his death beforehand, he gave his followers a meal which both belongs with Passover itself, and which points forward to what he was to accomplish the next day.

Now, the thing about Passover (one of the things about Passover!), is that when Israel was enslaved in Egypt nobody ever said it was as a result of their sin. To be sure, in Jesus' time, the terrible situation of the Jewish people (having been trampled on by Babylon, Greece, Syria and then Rome) meant that they regularly interpreted their plight not just in terms of needing a “*new Exodus*”, but also in terms of needing the “*forgiveness of sins*” that Isaiah and the other prophets had promised.

Exile was undoubtedly (from the prophets' point of view) the result of sin, so rescue from exile would mean forgiveness. Yet Passover was never about forgiveness.

Jacob and his sons were hardly paragons of virtue, but Genesis makes no connection between that and the long years of slavery. Indeed, when the famine strikes the Middle East, they don't say "*Ah, this is because we've sinned*". They say, "*We've heard there is corn in Egypt.*" They are not looking backwards at what might have caused the problem. They are looking forward to see what needs to be done.

That sets the pattern for one of the first, and most interesting, examples from the early days of the Church. A pattern that could point forwards to our own appropriate response to our present problems.

The early chapters of the book of Acts paint a vivid picture of the life of the early Church. It's quite a page-turner, and in the midst of the comings and goings and some dramatic moments it might be easy to miss an incident full of significance in itself and for our particular theme.

Acts 11 takes us to the church in Syrian Antioch, roughly 480 kilometres north of Jerusalem. It was a bustling, cosmopolitan city, right on the trade routes, with people from any and every country either resident or passing through. Many people—from many different nationalities—have come to believe in Jesus, and the Church was growing. Barnabas came from Jerusalem to check it out and was delighted, because he could see God's grace so clearly at work (11:23). Then Barnabas went to find Saul (who became "*Paul*" not long after this) and brought him to help with the work of teaching and preaching.

It was around this time that travelling prophets arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and told the assembly what the Spirit had revealed to him. There would, he announced, be a great famine over the whole world.

These things happened from time to time, as they had done nearly two millennia earlier, bringing Jacob and his family to Egypt. Luke commented that the famine actually took place in the reign of Claudius (i.e. AD 41–54). We know from other historical sources of more than one serious famine in that period.

So, what do the Antioch Jesus-followers say? They do not say either "*This must be a sign that the Lord is coming back soon!*" or "*This must mean that we have sinned and need to repent*"—or even "*this will give us a great opportunity to tell the wider world that everyone has sinned and needs to repent*". Nor do they start a blame-game, looking around at the civic authorities in Syria, or the wider region, or even the Roman empire, to see whose ill-treatment of the eco-system, or whose tampering with food distribution networks, might have contributed to this dangerous situation.

They ask three simple questions:

1. Who is going to be at special risk when this happens?
2. What can we do to help?
3. And who shall we send?

Some might look at this and think, Well, that's pretty untheological as a response. It's just pragmatic. But that would actually be the really "*untheological*" response. Here we stumble upon one of the great principles of the kingdom of God—the principle that God's kingdom, inaugurated through Jesus, is all about restoring creation the way it was meant to be.

God always wanted to work in his world through loyal human beings. That is part of the point of being made "*in God's image*". So, just as when in John 9 Jesus says that the works of God are going to be revealed, and then goes to work himself, we can imagine the Antioch church figuring out prayerfully what God was doing—not why the famine was occurring but what was to be done to help—and realizing that what God was doing, he was going to do through them.

That is part of believing in the work of the Holy Spirit. They were a busy and apparently prosperous church; the Jerusalem church was poor and (sporadically) persecuted.

So, the first two questions weren't hard. Then it was just a matter of prayerfully considering who to send. This is the kind of thing that Paul had in mind, I think, when he later wrote to the Roman Christians that God works with and through those who love him, to bring all things to a good end (Rom. 8:28). We will come back to that.

(Notice, by the way, one feature of the early Church in this story. Never before in world history had a multi-cultural group in one city felt under any fraternal obligation to a mono-cultural group in another city 480 kms away. The Jewish communities around the world would have understood the principle. Members of the Roman imperial civil service might have seen themselves as part of the same larger team as colleagues in another province. But the Church? We witness something unprecedented here. And very powerful. As we face our own questions about how to help, this example should be regularly before our eyes. Whatever the "Christian" response to Covid-19 should be, it should be one in which all Christians can join.)

The point is that under the "new covenant" spoken of by Jesus on the night he was betrayed—a reference to Jeremiah 31—the early Church believed that God was energizing them by his own personal presence. The Spirit was given so that individual believers, and still more the believers when joined together for corporate worship, would take up their responsibilities as God's eyes and ears, his hands and his feet, to do what needed to be done in the world.

This is why, from the very start, the early Christians looked out at the world, as Jesus had looked out upon his beloved people Israel, and had seen what God was wanting to do and say, and had prayerfully got on and done and said that themselves. That is what "mission" is all about.

As Jesus himself said in John 20:21, "As the father has sent me, so I'm sending you." As Jesus had been to Israel, so his followers were to be to the world. This is how it happens. And remember: Jesus said that to a small group of people who were locked in because they were afraid. Sound familiar? We'll come back to that.

After all, the programmatic statement of God's kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) isn't simply about "ethics", as people often imagine in our shrunken Western world. It's about mission. "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... the meek ... the mourners ... the peacemakers ... the hungry-for-justice people" and so on.

We all too easily assume that Jesus was saying "try hard to be like this, and if you can manage it, you'll be the sort of people I want in my kingdom". But that's **not** the point! The point is that God's kingdom is being launched on earth as in heaven, and the way it will happen is by God working through people of this sort.

After all, so often when people look out on the world and its disasters they wonder, why God doesn't just march in and take over. Why, they ask, does he permit it? Why doesn't he send a thunderbolt (or perhaps something a little less like what a pagan deity might do, but still) and put things right?

The answer is that God does send thunderbolts—human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hungry-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world. They are more effective than any lightning flashes or actual thunderbolts. They will use their

initiative; they will see where the real needs are, and go to meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies. Some of them will get hurt. Some may be killed.

That is the story of Acts, all through. There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purpose will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question "**Why?**" But to the question "**What?**"

- What needs to be done here?
- Who is most at risk?
- How can we help?
- Who shall we send?

God works in all things with and through those who love him.

None of this is to say that there will not be lessons to be learned in due course. It is all, in fact, pointing to the questions we must ask at the more global scale a little later. First, we move on to Paul's journeys and letters. I note in passing that when he addresses a situation in Corinth where there is some kind of a social crisis—probably another famine—he didn't tell the Corinthians to figure out what sin they or someone else had committed. He told them, as a bit of prudential wisdom, that right now it's better just to hold on, to see the crisis through, not to try for major life-changes. That's in 1 Corinthians 7: a controversial passage, but I think that's what's going on. Yes, there's a crisis; but no, you mustn't be alarmed. Just be wise about what you do and don't do while it's going on.

Perhaps the central point comes in Acts 17. Paul had arrived in Athens. He followed his usual pattern of speaking in the Jewish synagogues; but here he also got out and about in the marketplace. I suspect he had been looking forward to this moment. Paul had grown up in Tarsus, which along with Athens was one of the main centres of philosophy in Paul's day. That was because, back in 86 BC, the Romans had devastated Athens in punishment for giving support to Rome's enemies in an ongoing war. Most of the philosophers had left town. Many went to Tarsus. Paul knew his philosophy.

Anyway, Paul's teaching aroused not just interest but suspicion. The ancient world was tolerant of strange new cults. People worshipped their local gods or (in the case of Athens) goddesses, but there were numerous other temples and shrines. An easy-going pluralism was normally the order of the day. However, there were limits.

Famously, Socrates had fallen foul of the Athenian magistrates on that point: he had been put to death for corrupting the young (i.e. teaching them strange new ideas which might subvert the normal social order) and for introducing "*foreign divinities*".

Paul was summoned to address the Court of the Areopagus, and in particular to explain just what he meant by talking about "*Jesus and Anastasis*". Anastasis is the Greek for "*resurrection*"; they seem to have thought he was talking about a new god (Jesus) and a new goddess (Anastasis). This was not, then, primarily a philosophical discussion. It was potentially a capital charge.

In that light, what Paul did is all the more interesting. His aim was to work round to the announcement that there is One God, that this One God is going to hold the whole world to account (remember, he was speaking to the High Court in Athens!), and that the guarantee and means of this final judgment will be the man Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead. And the whole point is that this message constitutes a summons to repent (Act 17:30–31).

Ah, some might think, that's what we hoped was coming. But think for a moment about what Paul did not do. He could have plucked a few examples of recent disasters. There had been other famines. There

were major social and political struggles. He could have referred them all the way back, over a century earlier, to that awful day when Athens backed the wrong political horse and Rome, with no regard for the great past of a civilization, smashed the place up. In terms of ancient religion, all that kind of thing says, “*the gods must be angry*”. It looks pretty much like a summons to repent.

Yet Paul didn’t go there. He simply referred to the one great sign: God is calling all people everywhere to repent through the events concerning Jesus. Jesus himself is the One Great Sign. Paul will not allow anything else to be superimposed over that.

Jesus himself had warned that there could be no more warning prophets. Once the vineyard owner had sent the son, he had made the ultimate, unrepeatable offer. That is the logic underneath Paul’s careful speech. He was talking (as people do today) of God’s kingdom; he was talking about the need for people to repent; but the argument hinges, not on any independent events, not on some big crisis that’s just occurred, but on the facts concerning Jesus himself.

I suggest, then, that from the time of Jesus onwards we see Jesus’ followers telling people about God’s kingdom, and summoning them to repent, not because of any subsequent events such as famines or plagues but because of Jesus himself.

One early Christian book, however, might seem to be going in the opposite direction. That is the book of Revelation, where there is a sequence of “*plagues*” in chapters 8 and 9, modelled on the plagues in Egypt when Moses was confronting Pharaoh. Does this show that there are going to be more dramatic “*signs*” as the prelude to the destruction of the great city, “*Babylon*”—normally taken as Rome?

I don’t think so. For a start, the book of Revelation (as is well known) is full of fantastic imagery which is certainly not meant to be taken literally as a video-transcript of “*what is going to happen*”. There is a sense in which the whole book is simply drawing out the significance of the primary revelation, which is of Jesus himself (1:1–16).

The title of the whole book is “*Revelation of Jesus the Messiah*” (1:1). It is to Jesus himself—the Lion who is also the Lamb—that the task of taking forwards God’s whole project has been entrusted (5:6–14). All that follows in the book, then, is not something other than the unveiling of the truth of Jesus. It is, to be sure, applied to the world in various ways. Yet the victory of the Lamb, already won on the cross, is what matters.

The only sense in which that victory might be said to be extended forwards in time is in the suffering and witness of the Lamb’s followers. That is explicit in Revelation (6:9; 7:14–17). Jesus’ early followers knew that this suffering was not, theologically speaking, something other than the one-off sufferings of Jesus himself, and that the witness was actually Jesus himself, by his Spirit, announcing the news through them.

This is part of the mystery by which Jesus’ disciples understood themselves, indwelt as they were by Jesus’ Spirit, to be part of an identity larger than themselves, the messianic reality of Jesus himself. That is why Paul could speak in a dramatic passage in Colossians (1:24) of completing, in his own flesh, what had been lacking in the Messiah’s sufferings on behalf of his body.

The one-off death of the Messiah is proclaimed, portrayed before the world—sometimes visibly, in the form of the apostle’s own suffering. Paul said as much in 2 Corinthians 4 and 6. (This may also be the meaning of a cryptic passage in Galatians 3:1–5, where he talks of Jesus being “*publicly portrayed as crucified*”. He is perhaps referring to his own arrival in the Galatian towns in a bedraggled and beaten-up

state after having been set upon and stoned.) He was a walking parable of the Gospel of the crucified Messiah.

All of which leads us to one of the most important passages in our whole quest for understanding how, as followers of Jesus, we should approach the question of the Coronavirus. We stand in awe before the greatest chapter in Paul's greatest letter: Romans 8.

People who know Paul's writings, know that Romans 8 is full of faith, hope and love. It begins with the great declaration that *"there is no condemnation for those in the Messiah, Jesus"*, explaining that God *"condemned sin"* in the death of Jesus and gave his people the Spirit as the guarantee of being raised from the dead. It ends with a great shout of praise:

"No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:37–39)

This chapter describes a house we all want to live in. If we know anything about Christianity, we know that this—victory over all the dark powers inside us and outside, security in the present age and the age to come, all because of the outpoured love of God in the death of Jesus—this is what it's all about.

Yet to get from the beginning to the end of this amazing chapter you must go through the middle; and in the middle there is a strange passage which we often skip over. Except, perhaps, in times like these, when we are driven back to such passages by our circumstances.

Paul has described how all Jesus' followers, having received God's Spirit, are being led by that Spirit to the *"inheritance"* which awaits us. Paul was here explicitly drawing on that central Jewish theme, Exodus and Passover. The children of Israel, liberated from Egypt, were led by God himself through the wilderness to their *"inheritance"*, the promised land. That wasn't an easy time for them. We don't find our pilgrimage easy, either. Indeed, Paul put it like this:

"For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering." (Romans 8:16–17)

Suffering, it seems, is the inevitable path we must tread, even though, as Paul quickly adds, this suffering is small and trivial compared with *"the glory that is going to be unveiled for us"*.

Just to be clear once more, the *"inheritance"* here is **not** *"heaven"*, as many Christians have imagined. The *"glory"* has nothing to do with going to heaven and shining like angels. The *"inheritance"* is the whole renewed creation, the complete heaven-and-earth reality, renewed from top to bottom, as in Revelation 21, with corruption, death and decay abolished for ever. This is the final move in a longer sequence.

In the Old Testament we see an extension of the *"inheritance"* from the land God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15) to the whole world which God then promised to David (Psalm 2). The early Christians didn't exchange this for an *"otherworldly"* heaven for which we would have to leave *"earth"* behind. They saw it as being fulfilled by heaven coming to earth at last, so that, as in some of the glorious biblical promises, the whole earth would be filled with the divine glory, as the waters cover the sea (Psalm 72:19 with Isaiah 11:9 and similar passages).

Of course, we cannot tell what our transformed physicality will be like in God's new creation. Jesus' risen body had strange properties (coming and going through locked doors, but also eating and drinking and able to touch and be touched), but it didn't shine—though it had done earlier, at the transfiguration. Who knows? That's not important.

What is important is that the "*glory*" here, as in Psalm 8 where humans are "*crowned with glory and honour*", is the long-awaited rule of redeemed human beings over God's creation. Paul said exactly that in Romans 5:17, and it meshes with the vocation of the redeemed in Revelation 5:10 and elsewhere.

But what will that "*rule*" look like? Here we return to the theme of the way God wants to run his world. We still come to that question with mediaeval ideas of a monarch at the head of an army, sweeping all before him; or, perhaps, with eighteenth-century ideas of machines which simply work the way the inventor intended.

Either way, we often suppose that God's way of "*controlling*" the world is like one or the other, or a mixture of both. A majestic machine. Thus, if something strange happens in the world, we assume that this must be what God intended, or at least what he chose to permit. We then try to draw inferences from this ("*if God allowed this to happen, it must be because he was trying to tell us something*").

Once again, I insist: God can do whatever God wants, and if he chooses on special occasions to do, or permit, certain things for certain purposes, that is entirely his business, not ours. Just because that possibility always remains open, we shouldn't use it as an excuse to escape from the challenge—personal and theological—of this passage, at the heart of the chapter:

Creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation, eagerly awaiting the moment when God's children will be revealed. Creation, you see, was subjected to pointless futility, not of its own volition, but because of the one who placed it in this subjection, in the hope that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified.

In other words: God always wanted to rule his world through human beings. That is part of what it means to be made in God's image. It was gloriously fulfilled in the human being Jesus; and the way creation will at last become what it was always meant to be will be through the wise, rescuing, restorative rule of renewed, resurrected human beings. All those indwelt by the Spirit are, like Jesus, to be image-bearers, "*shaped according to the model of the image of his son*", as Paul put it in verse 29.

It means that, when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain. Paul put it like this, in a three-stage movement:

- **first**, the groaning of the world;
- **second**, the groaning of the Church;
- **third**, the groaning of the Spirit—within the Church within the world.

This is the ultimate answer, I think, to those who want to say that the present Coronavirus crisis is a clear message from God which we can at once decode, either as a sign of the End, a call to repent, or simply an opportunity for a standard kind of evangelism.

Here's how Paul expresses it:

"We know that the entire creation is groaning together, and going through labour pains together, up until the present time. Not only so: we too, we who have the first fruits of the Spirit's life within us, are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body. We were saved, you see, in hope ..."

In the same way, too, the Spirit comes alongside and helps us in our weakness. We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but that same Spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words. And the Searcher of Hearts knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will." (Romans 8:22–27)

Notice that Paul here said more or less the exact opposite of what some followers of Jesus are wanting to say at this time. Here is the world, groaning in travail: yes, we recognize that picture all right. There hasn't been a moment like this in my lifetime. It is taking its toll not only in many thousands of deaths, but in the stress and distress of millions who are shut in without company or help, or at the mercy of abusive partners, or losing jobs and livelihoods; or simply those whose temperament plunges them into gloom after a few days of being confined to the house. We know all that. So where should the Church be in the middle of it?

As we've seen, some are saying that the Church should be commenting from the side-lines: it's because you're all sinners! It's because the End is near! We know what's going on and we need to tell you! Yet that's not what Paul said.

Paul said that the followers of Jesus are caught up in the same "*groaning*". We are painfully aware of a big gap between the people we are right now (weak, frail, muddled, corruptible) and the people we shall be (risen from the dead into a glorious, new and immortal physicality). Now this means that we share the groaning of creation. This speaks directly to questions about what the Church itself should be doing at the present time.

The thing which the Church should be doing above all at the present time is praying. But this is a strange prayer indeed. Here we are, at the heart of one of the most glorious chapters in Scripture, and here was Paul saying "*We don't know what to pray for as we ought. We are at a loss!*" He implied that this isn't something we ought to be ashamed of. It is the natural place to be. It is a kind of exile; a kind of fasting; a moment of not-knowing, not being in "*control*", not sharing what we might think of as "*glory*" at all.

Yet that is the very moment when we are caught up in the inner, Triune life of God. Here is the dark mystery to which our present situation might alert us: the one thing we know from all this is that "***not-knowing***" is itself the right place to be.

There is a sense in which this is the deeply Christian version of Socrates's principle: he didn't claim to know much, but he knew that he didn't know and so kept asking questions. Translate that up into fully Trinitarian life and this is what you get: **at the very moment when we discover that we ourselves are "*groaning*" and don't know what to say or do, at that same moment we find that God himself, God the Holy Spirit, is "*groaning*" as well, groaning without words.**

There is a pattern here. Those who have long pondered the story of Jesus will recognize it. We expect God to be, as we might say, "*in charge*": taking control, sorting things out, getting things done.

- But the God we see in Jesus is the God who wept at the tomb of his friend.
- The God we see in Jesus is the God-the-Spirit who groans without words.
- The God we see in Jesus is the one who, to demonstrate what his kind of "*being in charge*" would look like, did the job of a slave and washed his disciples' feet.

Peter, blustering as ever, knew that this was all wrong. Jesus should be the top dog, and he, Peter would fight for him! (John 13:6–10, 37–38) The Church is always faced with the Petrine temptations: to run the world the "*ordinary*" way, if necessary by fighting ... but then to collapse in a heap when trouble comes.

Instead, what we see of God the Spirit, in Romans 8, reminds me inescapably of what we see of God the Son in John 13. As the hymn puts it:

*We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat
And find you kneeling at our feet.*

So, what are we saying? Not only do we, the followers of Jesus, not have any words to say, any great pronouncements on “*what this all means*” to trumpet out to the world (the world, of course, isn’t waiting eagerly to hear us anyway); but we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation, and we discover that at the same time God the Spirit is groaning within us.

That is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain. At those very moments when we find ourselves weeping with grief at the death of a friend or family member, or at the impossibility of having a proper funeral, or at the horror of millions of the world’s poorest being at risk, or simply because being locked down is inherently depressing—at those moments, when any words we try to say come out as sobs or tears, we have to remind ourselves that this is how God the Spirit is present at the heart of the agony of creation.

Yes: just like Jesus himself being hailed as “*king of the Jews*” when he shared the agony of Israel and the world on the cross. The redefinition of “*control*”, of “*kingdom*”, of “*sovereignty*”, which we find in the rest of the New Testament and particularly with Jesus himself, here reaches its true depth.

To understand this strange phenomenon—God himself, God the Spirit, apparently unable to manage words, but only groans!—Paul reached back to that great Psalm of lament, Psalm 44.

God is the one who searches the hearts and knows exactly what’s going on there. When our hearts are groaning, within the groaning of all creation, the God who searches the hearts—the Father, in other words—knows “*the mind of the Spirit*”, as some translations put it. He knows what the Spirit is thinking. Here is the mystery. **God the Father knows the Spirit’s mind; but the mind that the Father thereby knows is the mind that doesn’t know what to say.**

Dare we then say that God the creator, facing his world in melt-down, is himself in tears, even though he remains the God of ultimate Providence? That would be John’s answer, if the story of Jesus at Lazarus’s tomb is anything to go by. Might we then say that God the creator, whose Word brought all things into being and pronounced it “*very good*”, has no appropriate words to say to the misery when creation is out of joint?

Paul’s answer, from this present passage, seems to point in that direction. The danger with speaking confident words into a world out of joint is that we fit the words to the distortion and so speak distorted words—all to protect a vision of a divinity who cannot be other than “*in control*” all the time.

At this point, of course, someone might quote the next verse. Romans 8:28 has often been translated something like, “*All things work together for good to those who love God*”. That is the line taken by the King James Version, the NRSV, the ESV, the first marginal option in the NIV, and others.

That is what many Christians were brought up to believe, making people think they ought to be able to say, of any and every disaster, that in some way it was “*for the best*”. Many who have understood it like that—and who have found, let’s be clear, a kind of comfort in it—have effectively skipped over the previous verses. (“*They seem rather strange, but God will work it all out!*”) That has then sometimes cast an almost Stoic blanket over anything “*bad*” that happens. “*Never mind, all things work together for good.*”

- Is that really Christian comfort?
- Is that kind of passive “*acceptance*” really what the verses we have been studying seem to be advocating?
- Is that the appropriate response to the Coronavirus disaster?

I don't think it is. The way forward is to challenge two regular assumptions about the sentence.

First, is “*all things*” really the subject of the sentence? Is Paul telling us, in this most God-oriented of chapters, that “*all things*” have a kind of internal energy and operation by themselves?

No. It is in fact far more likely that “*God*” is the subject. Some early manuscripts added “*ho theos*”, “*God*”, to make this clear. God is after all the subject of the previous verse, albeit referred to as “*the Searcher of Hearts*”.

The Spirit is the subject of the second clause in verse 27 (“*because the Spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will*”), but this point is subordinate to the main sentence, where the main subject is “*the heart-searcher*”, God himself. It is easiest to assume that this carries on into verse 28. In verse 28 itself, God is twice referred to as “*he*” (“*those who love him*” and “*according to his purpose*”), which implies that he is already present in the sentence-construction. “*God*” is then clearly the subject of verses 29 and 30, which follow on immediately.

Second, and even more important, why are we so sure that verse 28 speaks of God working all things for the benefit of those who love him? That is the “*normal*” reading offered by the King James and others, and as we have seen it can be made to fit, either with “*all things*” working together for good, or with “*God*” who is working all things together for good, or indeed with “*the Spirit*” as subject.

The King James version, taking “*all things*” as the subject, renders it “*all things work together for good to them that love God*”. The NIV main text paraphrases, taking “*God*” as the subject and making “*those who love him*” the beneficiaries: “*in all things God works for the good of those who love him*”. I follow this line: “*God works all things together for good to those who love him.*”

The problem with this is that the verb doesn't mean “*to work for the benefit of*”; it means “*to work with*”. The word here isn't the normal word for “*work*”, “*ergazomaí*”. It is “*synergeō*”, “*work together*”. The syn- at the start means “*together*” or “*with*”; the erg- bit means “*work*”.

Paul used this word on two other occasions. In 1 Corinthians 16:16 he was talking about the “*fellow-workers*” who collaborate with him and with the whole Church. In 2 Corinthians 6:1 he summed up the previous passage (about God working through the apostles, like a monarch acting through his ambassadors), by saying that he is “*working together*” with God.

This would imply that if Paul was talking here about God being at work, he was saying that God is working with people, doing what he wants to do in the world, not all by himself, but through human agency. This is of course normal in biblical theology, looking back to the image-bearing vocation of humans in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8.

The cognate noun, “*syngos*”, is more common than the verb. Paul used it eleven times to refer to his colleagues, people who work with him. Once he used it to say that we—the apostles—are God's colleagues, working with him (1 Corinthians 3:9). That seems to be the point here. God works all things towards ultimate good with and through those who love him.

So, the encouragement and comfort here in Romans 8:28 doesn't amount to a kind of Stoic resignation. It is a call to recognise the truth of what Paul said elsewhere: that we are called to hard work, knowing that God is at work in us.

That work, it seems, takes place not least through suffering with the Messiah in order to share his "*image-bearing*" human "*glory*" (8:17, 29). When Paul spoke here of believers as "*those who love God*", he seemed to be reflecting the heart-to-heart communication, consisting of a lament too deep for words, which he had just described.

The last phrase of the verse ("*who are called according to his purpose*") then seems to be describing, not God's purpose **for** these people—that he would give them final salvation—but his purpose **through** these people.

God has "*called*" them to be part of his saving purpose for his suffering world. Believers, at this point, may not have words to speak their lament. But they may still have work to do, in healing, teaching, poor relief, campaigning and comforting. These things grow out of lament.

As with the church in Antioch, we may not be able to say "*Why*", but we may glimpse "*What*":

- Who is at risk?
- What can be done?
- Who shall we send?

Ironically, it has been easy in some traditions to reverse this: to be afraid of adding "*works*", lest one might compromise grace and faith, but to be only too ready to add explanatory words where, as Paul insisted, even the Spirit remains inarticulate.

Paul was not, then, proposing a Christian version of Stoicism. He was offering a Jesus-shaped picture of a suffering, redeeming providence, in which God's people are themselves not simply spectators, not simply beneficiaries, but active participants. They are "*called according to his purpose*", since God is even now using their groaning, at the heart of the world's pain, as the vehicle for the Spirit's own work, holding that sorrow before the Father, creating a context for the multiple works of healing and hope.

Such God-lovers are therefore shaped according to the pattern of the Son: the cruciform pattern in which God's justice and mercy, his faithfulness to the covenant and to creation, are displayed before the world in tears and toil, lament and labour.

That is our vocation in the present time. We'll continue further next week, to unpack our response through actions. Amen.

† Prayer

Father, we pray for the whole church,
which you called into being through your Son.
We are aware it was always your intention
that your church should be a blessing to all people everywhere.
We ask that by your Holy Spirit
your church may be daily renewed
and empowered for the task for which you gave it life.
We pray, Father,
that we and all our fellow Christians
may be ready for any sacrifice, any action, any declaration
that will clearly demonstrate faith, hope,

and love to our neighbours, our family members,
our friends, our co-workers, and our fellow journeyers.
Amen.

† **Benediction (Amen)**

Whatever we face, we do not face it alone.
Wherever we go, we do not journey alone.
However we suffer, we do not bear it alone.
Whoever we are and wherever we go and however we journey,
we go in peace, in hope, and in faith
for we go with Christ, who always goes with us.

Go...

**(+) In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**