

Nothing can separate us from God's love

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 9A – Rom 8 26-39 – Comprehending God's love for all

Prayer is a conversation; we listen and we speak. It probably doesn't help much if I say that, I know. I remember plenty of fruitless times trying to hear God speak when I was younger. It was as frustrating as meditation is for me; I was hopeless at it. Thoughts and worries poured into the silence and I ended up exhausted by all the emotion and problem-solving when I was meant to find stillness and refreshment. And I didn't think I heard God. I've learnt a lot since then, and I think Paul describes the learning process in today's reading from Romans.

Prayer *is* a conversation; we listen and we speak. Okay; speaking I can do. But what's the trick with this listening bit? That's where Paul starts with us today. He tells us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. He says when we're unable to pray, the Spirit prays *for us*, offering up whatever it is that we can't find the words to pray.

Those prayers of the Spirit are described as sighs / groans too deep for words. (You might remember last week creation groaning with us. ^{vv. 22-23}) We might have thought we weren't really praying if we couldn't tell our feelings and our hopes and our thanks to God – if all that came out was helpless groaning. But that's exactly what was needed. Paul is telling us that's alright; that God hears it as real prayer. The Spirit dwells within us and knows from the inside precisely how we feel. ^{5.5} *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* So those

groans we hear are coming from our hearts; the Spirit dwelling there and offering them to the Father on our behalf. Hear that, and we hear God speaking. There's the beginning of our learning to hear God's side of our praying; the Holy Spirit speaking from within our hearts.

²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

God searches our heart and knows our deepest prayers because the indwelling Spirit prays them with us and for us from right in t/here. God understands those prayers, even when they only seem to us to be inarticulate groans. Jesus bore an execution which wrings precisely that shocking noise from its victim; God knows it from the inside. That's the divine model of care; true empathy. God's heart hears the groans of the Spirit crying out from within our hearts. We are called to listen for that conversation of love – for us and for all creation.

Our learning to pray – to know it as a conversation – it's a process of hearing and entering into a much wider conversation. It's about more than us; creation is groaning, and our prayers are part of that. Creation is our responsibility. God called us to care for Earth; to serve Earth. So our prayer is both personal and cosmic.

This is very important to understand, because of the way some Christians have misused the next verse. ²⁸ *We know that **all things** work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* Often, you'll meet people who've been in tragic situations and the only care they received from a fellow Christian was this part of the verse – **all things** work together for good for those who love God. Whoever offered them this trite brush-off simply didn't want to risk being with them in their pain.

But this verse isn't talking about the tragic event which

caused someone's pain and grief. 'All things' doesn't mean *all happenings*. It means *all creation*. We're meant to work together with the universe for God's good purposes. How wonderful!

That's not the only hurtful misuse of this passage. The next two verses have copped it too.

²⁹ *...those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

From this and other passages ^(eg Rom 11) influential Christian thinkers have drawn the conclusion that before they're even born, some people are chosen for salvation and others for damnation. It's clear that Paul had no such thing in mind. Firstly, his focus is on the call: God's call to people to be like Jesus, and for the answering, enabling response of the Spirit calling from within us – the conversation that is prayer. And secondly, for Paul, the language of choosing and call echoes Abraham's call and Jesus' coming. It's a declaration that the promised blessing to/through Abraham of all families of earth is fulfilled in Jesus. And this makes Paul confident to offer us the wonderful question and answer dialogue that follows.

³¹ *What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?* ³² *He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?* ³³ *Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.* ³⁴ *Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.*

What a wonderful pile up of graces! The counsel for the prosecution is sent by the judge to become one and the same as both victim and accused, then returns to stand by the judge to plead on our behalf. *Who/what will separate us from the love of Christ?* Paul lists some of the calamities that have befallen him ^(35b) and some of the miseries that have plagued the Jews. ⁽³⁶⁾ Then he answers his own question: ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

So finally, every obstacle cleared away: *I am convinced* says Paul. This is Paul's testimony to something he has incontrovertibly experienced.

What *might* separate us from God's love? Here; try another list: he starts with death...death which it has dogged us since chapter 5; this is its last appearance in Romans!

Death, life, angels, rulers, the present, the future, powers, heights, depths – these things of the end times, these marks of an enslaved creation – they're barriers no more. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That question he asked – *Who will separate us from the love of Christ?* – it's not even a question any more. The gap has closed and finally we are free to hear that the love of Jesus for us is one and the same as the love of God for us and for all creation. God's commitment to us in Jesus is central and final.

This is the heart of Paul's theology; this is the heart of his Gospel. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Anyone can pray knowing God is like that! Amen