Spirit life and the hope of future glory

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Pentecost + 8A Rom 8.12-25

You're shopping, hopeful of a bargain. But they say, 'What you see is what you get.' When they say that, it's a way of keeping your hopes in check. They don't want you to burden them with too much expectation. Please, they say, just accept what you see now. But even so, you hope. And hope is indomitable. It sends your caution to the wind, and lets you dream. Hope's an extraordinary gift. It can inspire resilience and joy, persistence and patience where otherwise there might be worry and bitterness. Paul wrote about this at the end of our reading from Romans today: [8.24] *… in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?* [25] *But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

In hope we were saved. One of the greatest stories of hope in Jewish hearts is the story of the Exodus: the story of God's people being rescued from slavery in Egypt, and journeying towards freedom, towards the Promised Land. But reading the story, your most persistent emotion is one of hope. Because despite their escape from slavery, there's a life-long journey before their children will finally enter their promised home. Their hope and faith ebb and flow along the entire journey. Is Paul echoing this memory when he writes his words about hope to the Christians of Rome – [8.24] *in hope we were saved.*

I think so. Paul *does* proclaim that we are saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that the Spirit of Christ has come to dwell within our hearts. Yet we're still on the

journey of mortal life. So we're caught in the space that theologians call *the already and the not yet*. And as we saw a few weeks ago, even for Paul, that's anything but a picnic. Our old selves constantly struggle to reassert control – old habits of mind and behaviour take charge despite our will to have the Spirit transform us. That transforming – which Paul calls sanctification – is a slow journey of that gift of the Spirit, gradually transforming and renewing our wills.

In the Church, we mark a person's receiving this gift in the sacrament of Baptism. Our baptism marks our adoption as God's children, and that we have become full members of the Body of Christ. We enter a covenant with Jesus and with each other. And each week, we re-affirm this covenant with Jesus and with each other in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

But throughout our lives, we face a constant choice between a self-centred orientation (flesh) or a God-centred orientation (Spirit).

Last week, we heard Paul underline the significance of this on-going choice for Spirit over flesh. [8.6] *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace*. Today Paul starts to describe what happens for us when we make the choice to set our minds on the Spirit.

Verses 12-17 tell us that unlike the flesh (selfishness), the Spirit doesn't make slaves of us, but rather makes us God's children. The Spirit, received in Baptism, marks our adoption as God's children. Paul says this means we can address God as intimately and trustingly as Jesus did. [15] *When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'* [16] *it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* [17] *and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*. … Abba … Jesus' Aramaic heart language … now ours.

Remember Paul's writing to a twin community, Jewish and

Gentile Christians, where the Jewish Christians would see themselves as God's natural, chosen children. Paul's calling them to see that we Gentile believers are being afforded that astonishing honour as well.

But with the great honour comes challenge; Jesus didn't escape suffering, and we shouldn't expect to escape it either. *We are joint heirs with Christ if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

It was a dangerous struggle to live a life of faith back then, and not much has changed. On top of the inner struggle, there's an outward struggle which is most obvious in the social media world. There people of faith are hounded and bullied for their convictions by anonymous trolls. And in the physical world, people who champion care for the vulnerable and downtrodden are confronted with the demand to compromise their values, if not to shut up completely.

Paul names us God's daughters and sons. He identifies our task of faithful witness to compassion and justice as something much more than a personal journey. He sees it as something of cosmic significance. Verses 19-22 recall where God said in Gen 3.17 that the ground was cursed because of the selfish ambitions of the first humans. That curse is daily more obvious in what's happening to Earth now. Paul tells us that creation longs for us to be revealed as God's true children.[19] When that happens, he says, creation will be freed from its bondage to decay and together with humanity, *will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*[21]

This is our calling. The groaning and waiting – the struggle with hope in the last four verses – they link us with God's people who'd been freed from slavery in Egypt, yet struggled on their long journey to the Promised Land.

As we – freed slaves ourselves – as we travel the journey

into *life and peace*, the way we bear faithful witness to God's priorities is of cosmic significance. God's heart yearns for us to champion the health of creation, to advocate for justice for the downtrodden and dispossessed in this land and more widely, and to do all we can to ensure that all are welcomed in God's Church; all revealed equally to be God's children.

In hope we were saved. May we open ourselves more and more to the Spirit within and among us. May we vindicate that hope by the hope we share, and by the hope we inspire in others who wait with creation for freedom from bondage to decay; freedom to live in the peace of God's love. Amen