

**Texts: Luke 15:1-10 and Romans 8:18-39**

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

**Over the last few weeks we've begun** our sermon series on Luke chapter 15, exploring what these three parables of Jesus reveal to us of our heavenly Father.

**We've seen that Father God** loves with a seeking and prodigal love, for in the example of the shepherd and the woman we see a God who seeks us out, so as to rescue us from our lostness, because we are that precious to God. And then in the example of the father and his lost son, we see a God who loves with such extravagance patience and such reckless generosity that He is truly the one that is prodigal in His love and in His waiting.

**This week I want to attempt** to respond to one question that can arise in our minds in response to these parables. It is a question that can arise in response to many passages or come to us amidst the varied events of life. **And the question is this:** can God really be this good? You may even want to shorten it to: is God good?

After seeing and hearing about a good heavenly Father who loves with a seeking and prodigal love, such that He patiently waits for us, is it truly possible to hold on to such a view of our heavenly Father when all around us we see a terribly broken world with so much pain and hardship? Is it possible to hold the tension between the goodness of God and the suffering in the world?

**It is a question that people** have asked across the ages, and indeed one that Christians have asked across the centuries, for many of our New Testament letters and gospels were written amidst periods of great suffering, particularly persecution. It can be helpful to remember, that the authors of the New Testament were not only seeking to share the Good News of the Christian faith or how to live godly lives; those very same authors were often seeking to help the Church at large understand how to hold the tension between a belief in a good heavenly Father who loves with a seeking, prodigal love, whilst at the same time experiencing brutal treatment and even death for their faith in Jesus Christ.

**And likely, this question, this tension,** is one which many, if not all of us, have wrestled with, or are still wrestling with.

**Indeed, I suspect that few of us ever really settle the issue fully, and instead, we are forced by the repeated hardships of life to re-evaluate where we have got to in our handling of the tension. And I phrase it that way quite deliberately – “where we have got to in our handling of the tension” – because to say we should or can reach an answer, or a conclusion on the issue seems, to me, to be unlikely and maybe even unhelpful.**

**Four years ago, my family went through some really hard times, which I won't share today, because I don't want those times to become the focus of our attention. But shortly after those difficult experiences, we met someone who knew what had happened, but we hadn't seen this person in a while. In the brief conversation they had with us, I think they sought to give us a measure of support and encouragement.**

**However, what they shared with us was anything but that, because to try and tell us that “God only lets these things happen to people whom He knows can handle them” is not pastorally sensitive and I wouldn’t recommend saying it any time soon.**

**To claim to have answers to these questions is, in my experience, very unhelpful. Sure, we all want answers, but I’m just not certain God gives that many on these particular issues. Yet what that person shared, was probably shared out of where they were at in their own handling of the tension between belief in a good Father and the very apparent hardships of life. And likewise, what you’ll get from me today is borne out of my four years of wrestling with the issues, in light of the Scriptures, and represents some of where I have got to in my own thinking...**

**But most likely, my own thinking will continue to adapt, and hopefully mature, with the passing of time and the gaining of experience in pastoral ministry.**

**So, all that was introduction and setting the scene, but is it possible to hold the tension between the goodness of God and the suffering in the world? For myself, I think I have managed to reach a point where I can live with that tension, and I can do so because of what the Scriptures teach about the Christian faith.**

**Firstly, the Scriptures clearly face up to the reality of suffering in our world, and the Christian faith has always done so. Indeed, the Apostle Paul never tries to hide the fact of suffering and often he goes as far as to highlight it.**

**We read today:** 'For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay...We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.' (Romans 8:19-23)

Here Paul highlights that all of creation groans in its current state, that it yearns to be liberated from its bondage to decay. When Greek speakers talked about things decaying, they were referring to the tendency of living things to become sick, tired, or die...

**and it included the inevitable process by which material objects collapsed and food spoiled. So, the biblical tradition affirms the perspective that our world is broken, that it is not what it once was or should be, that it is not what God intended it to be.**

**But Paul is also aware that it is not only the wider creation which groans – we, human beings, also groan for something more, we groan to be free of the degeneration, sickness and death we see around us or experience. And this groaning is there just as much for Christian folk – for Paul affirms that we Christians continue to groan ourselves, that we are not exempt from problems, and sadness, and disappointment.**

**So, the Scriptures clearly face up to the reality of suffering and of our innate yearning for liberation from such circumstances; there is then no belittling of our experiences, there is no exhortation to a stiff upper lip, there is no encouragement towards a faith that either ignores these hardships by sticking one's head in the sand, nor towards a faith that is so spiritually minded that it glosses over the difficult times. The Christian faith is not scared to admit that the world is a mess - yet it also affirms the continued validity of faith and of being able to hold the tension between the goodness of God and the suffering we see around us.**

**The ability to hold that tension is possible, I think, because of two incredible facets of the Christian faith.**

**Firstly, we have hope. Paul writes: 'I consider that our present sufferings [do not compare] with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God...we ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.'**

**In the Christian faith we have hope, specifically, we have hope that this is not the end, that God hasn't given up, that God Himself hasn't been defeated, but that more is in store. And what is in store, is that there is a 'glory that will be revealed in us' (v18), there is a 'freedom and glory'**

for us the children of God (v21), and there will be a future 'adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies' (v23). These are phrases worth unpacking a little.

When Paul speaks here of 'glory' we need to remind ourselves of what else he has associated 'glory' with in **the letter to the Romans**: God's immortality (1:23), the immortality of those to whom God gives eternal life (2:7), the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead (6:4). So, in all these instances Paul associates 'glory' with the expectation of sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus and His immortality. Elsewhere, **Paul writes in Philippians**: 'But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who...will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.' (Philippians 3:20-21)

**When Paul speaks of 'glory' in Romans 8 this is what he has in mind – of a glory that will come to us from outside and transform us personally, such that it is 'revealed in us', in our physical, resurrected bodies.**

**Paul also writes, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> bullet point, that 'we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.' (v23) This is not to say that we aren't children of God already, because we are, and Paul has affirmed that very reality in v16-17. But there is a sense in which our adoption is also in the future because we don't experience now the fullness of what has been won for us by God in that we still have bodies which decay. In that sense, our salvation and redemption are still something we are waiting for, even if we have the firstfruits of it now.**

**So, in all this, Paul affirms the hope the Christian has, the hope they received when they placed their faith in Jesus: that the suffering and injustice which we experience will one day give way to God's re-created world, and in that "new creation" we will no longer grow weak, fall apart, or die but will live in immortality. Moreover, God will also release the world around us from the effects of sin, and so both we and the world will be free from all suffering. In that new creation our existence will be like that of Jesus Himself, who presently lives in immortality and in a loving relationship with Father God.**

**So, whilst the suffering in the world currently obscures the glory which is ours, that glory will one day be revealed in full, but in the meantime, **we hope** – we hope for what we do not yet have; we hope, we wait with expectation...**

**for a future in which every tear will be wiped away, and then there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the present order of things will have passed away.**

**This hope is part of what helps me hold the tension, when faced with the realities of life, that our God is truly good, because He hasn't left us or deserted us, He hasn't been defeated, instead, He has secured for us a future beyond our present comprehension, a future that is good.**

**And God has secured that future through His works and especially the person and work of His Son. Let's begin with the works of God. Paul writes: 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those**

**God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.’ (Romans 8:28-30)**

**Many of us will know that first line and may have found comfort in its words for our own lives. But I must admit, until this week I struggled to find much comfort in them, probably because I read more into those words than may actually be there. So often, I think we understand these words to say that God orchestrates the suffering of life or that God brings good out of the sufferings of life, that He is working all things together for good.**

**But renowned biblical scholar John Stott admits himself that this rendering of the words is ‘to be rejected, since all things do not automatically work themselves together into a pattern of good.’ And so, I think it might be helpful to review what Paul could be saying here.**

**Let’s unpack a few key words. ‘God works for the good...’- what is ‘the good’ here? Well, in the context of the passage, ‘the good’ is the glory which God has prepared for us, the glory in which we hope. That final future, that the new creation, where we shall share in the resurrection life of Jesus, with glorified bodies in a perfect new heaven and new earth – that is the good which Paul means, that is the purpose which God has for those who love Him, who are part of the people of God.**

**And if that is the good, then the ‘works’ which God does, are the actions of God which create, sustain and bring His people into the glory He has provided. **And so, we read,** ‘For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.’ (v29-30)**

**These are the ‘works’ of God, coupled with what Paul said in v26-27, that God has given us His Spirit to ‘help us in our weakness’ – He has given the Spirit to sustain us through the times of suffering and ensure that one day we will reach the glory in which we currently hope.**

**And so, if that is the ‘works’ of God, which bring about ‘the good’ He has planned and provided, then to say that God works ‘in all things’, is to say that in the midst of all things, in the midst of all circumstances and times of difficulty, God is at work, but His works are to help and sustain, to comfort and see us through into the glory He has purposed for us. That is how God works in all things.**

**So, it need not mean, and may not mean, that God orchestrates your suffering or that He will work all things together for good. Because, to be honest, I think we end up minimalizing so much suffering by our over-reaching with this verse, and we possibly over-reach because we want an answer to the “why?”, because we don’t like the tension and the unresolved questions.**

**But in our seeking to resolve it, we may go too far, and unnecessarily too far, because our hope is not undermined and God's purpose is not defeated, His works are not thwarted, and His love remains strong and sure, despite the tensions, despite the questions – and all because of **what we read next in Paul's writings:****

**'What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?...we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced...[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'** (Romans 8:31-32, 37-39)

**In the four years of my wrestling with the tension of believing in a good heavenly Father, yet experiencing the reality of our world, the Cross is what has got me through – that on the Cross, God died, in the person of His Son, for love of me, to secure a glory beyond anything that I can imagine and so guarantee reunion with those I have lost.**

**That foundational truth has got me through, has allowed me to hold the tension, because in the Cross I know that God is “for me”, and in the Cross and resurrection of Jesus, I know with certainty that God was won a sweeping victory, such that we are more than mere conquerors over the enemies of sin, flesh, decay, death or shame; none of these will prevail against the purposes of God because of our Saviour.**

**In the Cross of Jesus, I see a God who is concerned with our suffering, is concerned with our plight, such that He did something about it – He sought us out, as the parables of Jesus affirm; He died to reconcile us to Himself through the forgiveness of our sin, securing for us a place in God’s family, and thus one day full conformity to the image, to the likeness, of His glorified, His immortal Son.**

**Is it possible to hold the tension** between the goodness of God and the suffering in life? Is God truly as good as the parables of Jesus portray? I’ve managed to reach a point where I can live with that tension, because I see in our faith, a God who knows our suffering, who cares about our suffering, who never minimises our suffering, and so He did something about it in Jesus,...

**He entered into our suffering and so in Jesus, I see the love of God and I find hope, a God-given hope, of a future glory.**

**To Him be the praise and honour, this day and for ever.**

**Amen.**