

Rom 8:18-27 The glory of the children of God

Being engaged is quite a stressful time of life.
I guess I'm talking about being engaged for a Christian person.
For a Christian person,
being engaged is about having plans for a new life,
but the new life hasn't started yet.
When Cherida and I we engaged,
she was up in Sydney studying to be an audiologist,
and I was in Tasmania working for Comalco.
We were living as single people,
and we were single people.
Yet mentally we were already making plans for the future,
plans for a completely different life.
The tension comes because you would like to drag the good things
that you are planning for the future into the present.
But you can't.
They have to wait until after you say 'I do.'
I would describe this tension
as the tension between the already and the not yet.

The Christian life is characterised
by the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'.
Last week, we read about all the good things
that come to us as Christians
because God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts.
Perhaps the pinnacle of these good things
is being adopted as God's children.
8:16 "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit
that we are God's children."
And yet we all share the experience that our life here and now
is not the same as our future hope.
In today's reading,
Paul says that our lives now will be characterised by suffering
and our lives in the Kingdom of God will be characterised by glory.

Suffering and then glory.

8:18 “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Why does it have to be that way?

I’m sure all of us would be quite happy to skip the suffering and go straight to the glory part.

I wonder who you believe was the greatest British PM?

My knowledge of British history is inadequate.

But one name stands out.

Winston Churchill.

Why?

His glory comes because he led in a time of suffering.

He was PM during WWII,

the time of greatest threat and greatest suffering

to the nation of Great Britain.

With enduring suffering comes glory.

You can’t split them apart.

There have been times when Christians have tried to prize them apart.

Our natural disinclination to suffer

has led us to construct a theology that has no place for suffering.

I’ve been to prayer meetings where I’ve heard prayers like this,

“In the name of Jesus,

I claim power over the cancer in this man’s body.

Jesus’ blood has defeated cancer.

I claim victory by the cross.

Cancer, be gone!”

Well it is true that Jesus in his death on the cross

defeated the evil forces that bring suffering

including sickness into the world.

But we’re engaged.

We’re not married yet.

The victory is won,

but it is not consummated.

The ravages of sin and death are still around,
they still cause suffering,
and there is no quick fix.

It is also true

that sometimes the power of God breaks through from the age to come
into the present age and miracles happen.

And when that happens,

often it's God answering the prayers of his faithful people.

But whenever it happens it's due to God's gracious kindness.

We have no promise in the Scriptures

that we have access to an unlimited supply of God's healing power
in the present age.

It's not possible to twist God's arm.

Getting yourself worked up into a passionate belief

that God will do whatever you ask of him,

if only your belief is strong enough,

will not be a guarantee.

In fact it may be a prelude to disappointment.

You can't just invoke the blood of Jesus shed on the cross

and 'claim' healing.

What you need to do is ask in faith,

confident that God has the power to do what you have asked of him.

But ask knowing that the request you are making

is not one that God often grants at the moment.

We live with the now and the not yet.

Now is the age of suffering.

Not yet is the age of glory.

Suffering and then Glory

8:18 "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing
to the glory that will be revealed in us."

Suffering and then Glory,

but the two things should not be compared.

"Not worth comparing" is Paul's phrase.

A bit further down,
Paul uses the illustration of childbirth.
Now child bearing is a painful process.
I talk confidently never having experienced it,
because I have witnessed it five times.
For many women it will be the most physical pain
they will endure in their lives.
But can you compare the pain of childbirth
to the joy of being mother to a new born child?
Are the two even worth comparing?
Would a mother ever say,
“On a scale of 1-100,
the pain I just experienced was about a 90,
and on a scale of 1-100,
the joy I experience from my new baby is about a 95,
so on balance,
by about 5 points,
it was worth having you, my child.”?
Never.
That would be obscene.
The pain and the joy can’t be compared.
They are not on the same scale.
When the joy comes,
then the pain (even though it was great at the time)
the pain fades away to insignificance.
That’s why some women have more than one baby.
In the same way,
our present sufferings aren’t even worth comparing
to the glory that will be revealed in us.

Suffering and then Glory.
another thing to notice is that we aren’t the only ones who suffer.
The creation suffers too.
In verses 20-21,
Paul says,

“For the creation was subjected to frustration,
not by its own choice,
but by the will of the one who subjected it,
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.”
So God subjected the creation to frustration.

What does that mean?

The story dates back to Genesis chapter 3.

Adam and Eve were in the garden.

They sinned and God declared that there would be punishment.

The judgement for the woman was pain in child birth.

But to Adam, God said,

Gen 3:17“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you.”

So our behaviour has an impact of the creation.

Adam sins.

And the ground is cursed by God.

And from that we understand

that the whole created order has been marred because of the fall.

Not just thorns and thistles.

Earthquakes, disease, floods.

Things break, things wear out, things die and things rot.

None of these things were part of God’s original good creation.

Creation was spoilt by us –

when Adam and Eve disobeyed God.

And if you think about it,

nothing much has changed actually.

We are still spoiling creation.

In the 10 years between 2010 and 2020,

467 species were declared extinct.

And the fortunes of creation are tied up with our own fortunes.

Creation will be rescued when we are.
And that sort of thinking is not a novelty that Paul has dreamt up here.
It's been part of how God's people have understood his plans
for a very long time,
even in Old Testament times.

When heaven is pictured in the Old Testament,
here are some of the images that are used.

This is from Isaiah,

65:17 "Behold, I will create a new heavens and a new earth."

Then spends some time spelling out what this will mean for people
and then we read this sentence.

65:25 "The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like an ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,"
says the Lord.

In the new creation,

the picture is of animals that would usually be predator and prey
enjoying a harmonious relationship.

We aren't just talking about things working at their best.

Like a lion never gets sick or grows old or dies.

But the structure of creation is changed,
so that Lions no longer eat meat.

And the structure of lots of other things will be changed,
so that there's no more in built imperfections.

Last Sunday we read of our promise of transformed bodies.

"And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead
is living in you,

he who raised Christ from the dead
will also give life to your mortal bodies
through his Spirit, who lives in you."

It wouldn't be much good giving us perfected bodies,
if an earthquake came along and swallowed our perfected bodies up.
For the new heavens and the new earth to live up to the promises

that God has made about them,
not only do we need to be changed,
but the creation needs to be transformed also.

So when Paul says in verse 19,
“The creation waits in eager expectation
for the children of God to be revealed.”
It’s not just that the creation is longing to see
what we look like in our brand new bodies.
Like an anxious crowd waiting to see a fashion parade.
But the creation is longing for its own transformation.
And it knows that it won’t be transformed until we are.

My sister Kathryn and brother in law Charlie worked in Mexico
as missionaries for 10 years.
When Charlie's sister Lucy was getting married
they flew home for a week for the wedding.
And it was a reasonably painful visit for them.
A week is just long enough
to be reminded of how badly you miss all the loved ones back home.
A week is just long enough for your children to be reminded
of all the things you can get in Australia that you can’t get in Mexico.
The Fletchers were caught between two worlds.

And spiritually, we are caught between two worlds also.
There is lots of groaning in our passage.
In verse 22 creation is groaning,
“The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth,
right up to the present time.”
In verse 23 we are groaning,
“We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship,
the redemption of our bodies.”
And in verse 26 the Holy Spirit is groaning,
“The Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”
The creation’s groaning is like birth pangs.

Like them not only because the pain of being spoiled is great.
 But also like them because it's the sort of pain you get
 when you know something good is just around the corner.
 Jesus described it like that himself in Mark's gospel.

Mk 13:8 "Nation will rise against nation,
 and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines.
 These are the beginning of the birth pangs."

When God's new creation is just around the corner,
 the pain of the spoilt creation is greater,
 because it can see that things will soon be different.

Our groaning is like the groaning of the Fletchers.

The groaning of those caught between two worlds.

If you didn't have the Holy Spirit living inside of you,
 you might be reasonably content with life as it is.

If you've got good health, plenty of food, and a roof over your head.
 Life's not so bad.

It could be a whole lot worse.

Go to Israel or Ukraine or Palestine or Russia for example.

But if you have the Holy Spirit inside of you,
 then you know that there's the promise of something so much better.

You are like a child,

who was perfectly happy playing with his toys,

until someone told him that Daddy was going to take him to the movies.

And then suddenly every five minutes its,

"Can we go to the movies now?"

Suddenly things that used to be satisfying,
 satisfy no longer.

Well how do we respond to being caught between two worlds?

How do we respond to the tension of the already and the not yet?

Paul describes two sorts of waiting that we are engaged in.

In verse 23,

"We wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship."

and in verse 25,

“We wait for it patiently.”

There are two ways to look forward to heaven.
You can do it eagerly
and you can do it patiently.
And Paul tells us to do both.

This whole caught between two worlds thing has tension in it,
so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised,
that the response that's expected of us has tension in it too.
eagerly and patiently aren't the easiest of bedfellows, are they?
If you are eager, then very often you aren't patient.
At least if you are eager then it's always hard to be patient.
But if you are very patient, then maybe you aren't being eager.

I think it would be fair to say
that most Christians lean to one or the other.
But Paul tells us to do both.
Earlier I told you about a man
I heard praying for a sick friend at a prayer meeting.
“In the name of Jesus,
I claim power over the cancer in this man's body.
Jesus' blood has defeated cancer.
I claim victory by the cross.
Cancer, be gone!”
Do you think he was eager or patient in waiting for heaven?
Well I'm sure he's eager.
But chances are he's impatient.
He's wanting to drag the promises of heaven into the present.
He can't wait for God to do what he has promised,
he has to have it now.

But I've also heard other prayers for the sick.
“Dear Lord,
We pray for our friend Fred.

Please give him strength in his suffering.
We pray you would comfort his family at this time.
We pray you might guide and direct the doctors who are treating him.
In Jesus' name.
Amen."

Now there's nothing wrong with asking any of those things.
It's fine to ask for comfort and for guidance for medical professionals.
But it's a prayer with lots of patience
but no eagerness for the new creation.
Jesus has defeated sickness and death on the cross.
Why would you not ask for healing when praying for the sick?
Could it be that the person praying has lost sight of the next world?
Is their spirit waiting eagerly for the redemption of their body?
And let me say that Anglicans are far more likely
to fall into the trap of being too patient.
If there's a balance to be struck between patience and eagerness,
we need to work on being more eager.

We need to be eager in our patience and patient in our eagerness.
God has given us two eyes.
We need to have one eye on the next world and one eye on this world.
We live in the now and the not yet.
It's a difficult balance to strike.
And it's reassuring that God is there to help us.
In verse 26,
"The Spirit helps us in our weakness.
We don't know what we ought to pray for,
but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."
So as we're caught between two worlds,
God's Spirit is there praying on our behalf.
Let's pray, thanking God's Spirit for his prayers for us.
And let's ask the Lord to help us live in the now and the not yet.