

Romans 8:12-25

Psalm 119:129-135

Matthew 13:10-13, 31-35, 44 46

The Assurance of Enduring Discipleship

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8: 18)

Sixty-two years ago, when I was a second-year theological student, I first proposed this text as a sermon offered to the Friday student preaching class. Having long forgotten its drift, I decided, perhaps foolishly, to read it again - now as an act of penance. Preachers have long been advised never to keep their early efforts, but perversely I have, if only in the hope of doing better.

What was the sound and fury of this first amateurish offering that led to my effort’s missing the point? It was interpreting Paul’s “sufferings”, and the “groaning of creation”, to be the cultural conversion of living Christian faith into conventional formulaic religion. This arguably imaginative imposition on the text might have been excused, because for some years before becoming a theological student, I had been captivated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s intriguing concept of “non-religious” interpretation of Christian faith in his *“Letters and Papers from Prison”*. If you haven’t ever read them, I urge you to do so, for eighty years later what he wrote has all come true. So, even though it was misconceived, and would certainly need a different text, my sermonic exertion was not entirely wrong. The fact is that emancipation of Christian faith from the category of “religion” is still a - if not the - major discovery that awaits a largely hostile or apathetic “No-religion” Western culture.

I suppose that every generation hearing this text will look to the issues of the day to find a correspondence to Paul’s “sufferings of the present time”. To be sure, it would be understandable hearing in our day his striking phrase, the “groaning of creation”, to conceive of our “sufferings” as the escalating horrors of climate change, not to speak of the ambiguous potential of burgeoning artificial intelligence. These, of course, overlay the more enduring candidates we experience as human suffering – incessant global warfare; our physical frailties; the pain, intended or unintended, that accompanies our mutual interactions; even the closing of our churches. All these which we experience as ‘suffering’, understandable though they be, would actually be a misreading of our text.

The reason why all such interpretations of the “sufferings of the present time” identified as being one or more contemporary cultural phenomena misses the point – or at least Paul’s point - is to be found in the little word in the text, “time”. *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time....”* The Greek word for time that Paul employs here is not, as we might hear it to be, tick-tock, every-day, worldly time; the faces of a watch; the dates on a calendar or a tombstone, but rather is a time that comes laden with significance – he uses a word that really means something like “*opportune*” time, *eventful* time, *filled* time, time having real *significance*. Well, we might roundly assert: what could be more evocative as being absolutely decisive, cataclysmic even, of the lists of human “suffering” that we can readily compile?

But the fact is that Paul's "filled-time", "*the sufferings of this present time*", is about something *other* than the world in its always-present unpredictability. Rather, he is writing to a persecuted church facing *absolute* predictability, whose "suffering" members know themselves to be well and truly "cultural resident aliens". Since that is increasingly how we find ourselves, Paul's "eventful time" should prove to be the greatest encouragement. With it we are being drawn into a new perspective as to how the world looks viewed from *beyond* its suffering self - a view of our everyday plain, we might say, from an elevated ridge.

We get a sense of what is at stake in standing on such an elevated ridge when we hear the cryptic repeated Heaven-on-Earth parables offered to us this morning in the gospel of Matthew. In each we hear of the essentially "innocent" everyday world - of an insignificant mustard seed planted in chronological time, but destined to become a tree robust enough to accommodate "*the birds of the air*", a then-synonym for the Gentiles. What Matthew is prefiguring here is an unanticipated "filled time", soon to unfold as inclusive Easter gift replacing what was then a daily Jewish necessity of Gentile exclusion. Or we hear of yeast, in itself pointless, now transformed when added to flour to make the human necessity of bread. Or again, an unobserved hidden treasure is secured by a man's parting of his total wealth, as indeed is that of a merchant in his everyday employment coming across a pearl of such value that absurdly he is prepared to sell everything for it. Or, if you prefer a contemporary parable, what about likening an earthly "heaven" to a spare *temporal* moment visit to an Op shop - an "Opportune" Shop remember - only to exclaim discovering an unanticipated find: "*I've been looking for one of these!*" Time well spent indeed!

The point is that all these everyday chronological activities have the potential to become transformed when the gospel is at stake into something radically more - a "more" which Jesus, surely extraordinarily, identifies as an experience of heaven-on-earth. In just this way, in our text, Paul is proposing a freely-embodied conscious taking up of "suffering with Christ" as being different from all every-day "sufferings", an experience of being offered a potential new shape to the world different from the harsh realities of everyday life.

This embodied suffering with Christ comes as both a *participation* as well as an *anticipation*. *Participation* obviously, in an already willing sharing - but doing so as the *anticipation* of something not yet at hand. He calls this duality of participation/anticipation the pre-figuring of a "*glory about to be revealed to us*". His point is that this future is no longer merely an *extension* of the present. It is an *alternative* to it. This radical reversal of time proposes a transfer from one domain to another - from the ambiguities of "everyday time" to a discovery of "opportune time". It consists of living a life that is coming from an assured future into our present uncertain time. If *participation* emphasises the "already" of this arrival, *anticipation* proposes its "not yet". For this reason, we hear that this "not yet" is to be experienced as "hope".

But with this little word "hope", we clearly have a real problem. Like most Christians words today, "hope" has been cast adrift from its theological mooring. We speak of those who live by hope as optimists - "glass half full" people, unlike "glass half empty" pessimists - with a distinct preference for the former. "*I hope it won't rain for the match - I'm optimistic!*" And then, when it does rain: "*I suppose that I should have been more pessimistic*". Either way, true hope doesn't stand a chance. For, as Paul observes, who exhausts hope in what is seen, that is, when we already know that the day will either be sunny or wet? We need something much more reliable than this - to grasp a better true hope that has its ground beyond the inevitable paralysis of an always capricious optimism or pessimism?

Our text proposes an answer. Grounded hope will emerge when “suffering” is grasped as the necessity of a daily fundamental reorientation - what the Gospel calls “repentance” - a willing taking up of that inevitably concealed unobservable union between God and the world once and for all revealed in the Cross and resurrection of Christ. But, if this sort of hope is to have any contemporary force, we really do need to find a better word. What about when you hear the word hope, substituting for it something like “assurance”? Because assurance has a ground, a rationale, that evades a “whistling in the dark” vacuous hope that could go either way.

In a few moments we will be invited to stand and confess the faith of the Church. Amongst many things, we will find ourselves saying: *“I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”*. What are these assurances but simply “symbols of glory”, the luminous unveiling of what it has all been for? This most decisive assurance of all is what the Gospel calls “joy” - that no terror awaits that has not already been defeated – a solidity quite other than mercurial “happiness”. For with joy we live, not towards what *may* be, but to the vindication of what has *already* been secured. And this is simply to endorse Paul’s confidence for ourselves:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits....”
