

## ROM 8.28: GOD REIGNS

[Chelmsford 3 June 2012]

On this Jubilee Sunday, when we are very rightly celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, I want to declare there is a yet higher throne.

There is one who reigns supreme – and that is God himself – the God, that is, who has revealed himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At a Christmas concert featuring Handel's Messiah the programme contained a printer's error. Only one letter was involved, but what a difference that change of letter involved!

For instead of reading, "*Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth*", the line in the Hallelujah chorus now read: "*Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent resigneth*"

We may smile this morning at the printer's error - and yet if some of us are honest, there, there have been times when we have been tempted to wonder whether in fact God had actually resigned. Is God always omnipotent? Does God always reign?

At times, there seems to be little evidence of a loving, caring, omnipotent God.

Just think of the people who live in your street - think of the pain & the sorrow, the anxiety & the disappointment, some of your neighbours have encountered.

Or maybe you don't need to look beyond the confines of your own home and family.

In recent months some of you have lost loved ones, some of you have been made redundant, some of you have had your hopes shattered and the bottom has fallen out of your world.

Where in all this is God?

Some would question whether God is anywhere to be found at all. The 19th century French novelist, Stendahl, once said: "*God's only excuse is that he does not exist*".

The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, declared: "**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**".

Paul was had no doubts that God was and is working his purposes out

God is in control. Paul would have happily joined in the Hallelujah chorus: "*Hallelujah, for the Lord God the omnipotent reigneth*".

I find it significant that Paul's declaration of confidence in God comes immediately after a passage in which he has been talking of suffering and of pain - "**We know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth**" (Rom 8.22).

Paul was under no illusions about life.

He didn't live in some kind of spiritual bubble, cocooned from the realities of life.

He knew that life could be tough, that life could be hard, that life could be unfair.

Indeed, he goes on later in this chapter to speak of a world permeated by "**trouble...**

**hardship.. persecution... hunger.... poverty... danger... death**" (Rom 8.35).

And yet when these things came his way, he didn't curse God, he didn't turn his back on God, he believed in the providence of a loving God, who cares for each one of his children.

Paul would have agreed with the unknown poet of Lamentations: "**The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue... The Lord is good to everyone who trusts in him, so it is best for us to wait in patience**" (Lam 3.22,26).

One of my goals as your minister is to "*excite fresh hope and faith in God*". This morning I want to excite fresh hope and faith in God by exploring the providence of God in the light of Rom 8.28: "**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**".

## 1. GOD WORKS FOR GOOD

First, do note that it is **God**, who **works for good**.

Some older people may be more familiar with the translation of the AV, which translates Rom 8.28 as: "**All things work together for good to them that love God**".

Strangely the NRSV adopts a similar translation: "**We know that all things work together for good for those who love God**".

But although a possible translation, I believe it is an unhelpful and misleading translation.

The fact is that not all things do work for good.

Some things in life are evil, and it is a nonsense to say otherwise: e.g..

- the carelessness of a drunken driver which results in carnage on the road and robs a young family of its father or mother brings anything but good. Drunken driving does not work for good, not even in the life of the believer.
- the abuse of a young child by an adult whose mind is warped doesn't bring any good. It destroys trust, it blights future relationships, it ruins the carefree innocence of childhood
- the all-consuming pressures at school which lead to the nervous breakdown of a gifted and dedicated teacher do not work for good. The school is the poorer, and the individual teacher goes through hell - it takes months, sometimes years, before his or her life is rebuilt.

None of these things are good - not even to those who love God.

To say "**all things work together for good**" is a nonsense.

Indeed, it is a form of blasphemy - for it is to ascribe to God not only happiness and joy, but also suffering and pain.

But this we cannot do. God is a good God.

He created a world for us to enjoy, not to endure.

He is most certainly not to be blamed for all the evils in this world.

Suffering and pain have never been a part of God's perfect purpose - rather these things are part of our fallen world and are rooted in our human sinfulness.

BUT, if "**God works only for good**", then why, some might ask, is there so much suffering and pain?

Or does God in fact lack the power to sort things out? Is this world beyond his control?

Are we engaging in wishful thinking when we sing "*Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth*"? Surely not.

The fact is that God does not treat us, his creatures, like marionettes. We are not to be likened to puppets on a string with no freedom of our own to do our own thing.

The glory of humankind, as also the tragedy of humankind is that we have been given freedom - freedom to decide our own destiny - freedom to go our own way.

How does this relate to God's overall-plan for the world?

We may perhaps liken our world to a large ocean-going liner, with God, the divine captain, at the wheel - the passengers on board are free to do what they like - but they cannot change the ultimate direction of the ship.

Alternatively we may liken our world to a game of chess, with God the master chess player sitting the other side of the board - we, the players, are free to make our moves - but God, the master chess player, is able to counter whatever move we make. God is in ultimate control. As Paul makes clear here in Romans 8, there is a new world coming.

The creation may groan with pain, but such pain may be likened to "**the pain of childbirth**" (Rom 8.22).

We may have spoilt the world through our own sinfulness and selfishness, but the good news is that sin and death will not have the last word in this world - for "**God works for good**". There is a new world coming - and in that new world to come of God's making "**there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain**" (Rev 21.4).

Yes, make no mistake about it, this world is God's world.

And in this world "**God works for good**".

Paul does not explain what he means by the word "**good**".

He clearly is not speaking about our comfort or our convenience.

Rather he is speaking about our "*ultimate good*".

My mind goes to some words Jeremiah wrote in God's name in a letter to the Jews in the Babylonian exile after the destruction of Jerusalem: "**I know the plans I have for you, plans to bring about prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for**" (Jer 29.11).

## 2. IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS FOR GOOD

All things may not work for good - but nonetheless God can be at work **in all things**. And where God is at work, there good can come, however dark things may appear to be.

Yes, the "**all things**" in which God works and to which the Apostle Paul refers include the '**suffering**' of v17 and the '**groans**' of v23.

"**In all these things**", Paul is saying, God is at work, bringing about good..

Even those things which at first sight may appear to be totally negative can end up having a positive purpose to play in the execution of God's eternal plan.

"*Nothing is beyond the overruling, overriding scope of his providence*" (John Stott).

We see that in the Cross of Jesus.

Never was there a blacker day in the history of the world than that First Good Friday.

Evil did its darndest when men crucified the Son of God.

None of those who stood at the foot of that Cross could have dream that that day could ever have been termed a '*Good Friday*'.

BUT out of that cruelest of acts everlasting good has come.

What was true of the Cross, can also be true of your life and mine.

Suffering and disappointment may not belong to the perfect will of God, but nonetheless God can use our suffering, he can use our disappointment.

However bleak life may seem, however unfair life may seem, with God the outlook is never hopeless.

My mind goes to the words with which James opens his letter: "**My brothers and sisters, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure**" (Jas 1.2-3). The fact is that tough times can often be incredibly productive times.

Difficulties can turn us into stronger people.

The trials of life can often be used to knock off some of our imperfections, so that as a result we become better and wiser people.

In the short-term God may not appear to have been working for our good - but in the longer-term our ultimate good may have been better served as a result of the difficulty or failure we may have experienced.

Yes even the darkest of clouds can have a silver lining.

### "We know that in all things God works for good"

Paul was here writing from personal experience.

- On one occasion, Paul was put in prison. At the time, it must have seemed that this would be a limitation to his ministry - but in fact the very reverse became true. As he wrote to the church at Philippi: "**The things that have happened to me have really helped the progress of the gospel. As a result, the whole palace guard and all the others here know that I am in prison because I am a servant of Christ. And my being in prison has given most of the brothers and sisters more confidence in the Lord, so that they grow bolder all the time to preach the message fearlessly**" (Phil 1.12-14)
- On another occasion, Paul speaks of having suffered from "**a thorn in the flesh**". The precise nature of this thorn is uncertain - it may have been eye trouble; alternatively it may have been recurring malarial; whatever, it was, it was certainly unpleasant. And yet, as Paul discovered, even out of this ongoing physical difficulty God could work good. For Paul came to know God at work in greater measure in his life. God's "**answer was: 'My grace is all you need, for my power is made greatest when you are weak'... I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong**" (2 Cor 12.9-10)

### 3. IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS FOR GOOD WITH THOSE WHO LOVE HIM

The phrase "**with those who love him**" is no mere addition.

Indeed, in the original Greek, this phrase comes right at the beginning of the sentence, and is undoubtedly put there for reasons of emphasis: "*For those who love God we know that in everything God works for good*".

"**With those who love him**". This is an important rider.

Paul is not stating a universal truth applicable to men and women in general.

Rather, he is talking about those who have responded to God's love by trusting him and loving him, whatever.

Sadly disaster and disappointment can make some people bitter and sour.

They moan about their lot. They talk about the unfairness of life.

They focus on their loss and upon their unhappiness.

They become pitiful and self-pitying individuals.

Sometimes too, they begin to rail against God and shake their fists at him.  
They give up on God, they give up on God's people.

The truth is that there is nothing automatic about God working for good in all things.  
For God to work, we have to co-operate.  
And we co-operate by loving him and by trusting him whatever.

At the time when our world collapses, it may well be difficult to see any good emerging from our troubles.

But this is where we are called to trust God.

This is where we need to turn and look again at the Cross of Christ, and see there the everlasting heart of God.

Whatever else is uncertain, one thing we can be certain of is that he loves us - God wants our ultimate good.

What's more, the God who has proved his love for us in sending his Son, does not leave his children to cope on their own - he sends us his Spirit to help us in our weakness (see Rom 8.24).

Instead of asking God why he has allowed disaster to strike, maybe we need to ask: "*What God do you want me to learn? Accepting what cannot be changed, how can I become wiser, more sensitive, more thoughtful, more courageous? What can you and I, God, together make of this?*"

**"We know that in all things God works for good".**

This has been the experience of those who love him

This was Joseph's experience. When his brothers sold him into slavery, he must have wondered where God was to be found. And yet subsequently he realised that God overruled even in that cruel act of betrayal. At the end of his life he told his brothers "**You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good**" (Gen 50.20).

But that good was not instantly recognisable.

Time had to elapse before the hand of God become evident.

To quote again the poet of Lamentations: "**The Lord is good to everyone who trusts in him. so it is best for us to wait in patience - to wait for him to save us**" (3.25,26).

Yes, we need to be patient - for God's handiwork is often best perceived at a distance.

This thought comes to the fore in a poem I came across as I prepared this sermon:

*"My life is but a weaving, between my God and me,  
I do not choose the colours, he worketh steadily,  
Of times he weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,  
Forget he sees the upper side, and I the underside.  
Not till the loom is silent, and shuttle cease to fly,  
Will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.  
The dark threads are as needful in the skilful Weaver's hand  
As the threads of gold & silver in the pattern he has planned"* (Anon)

**"We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him".**

*[Rom 8.28]*

To those of you who are going through tough times, let me encourage you to trust God, to wait patiently for him to reveal his hand.  
For God loves you - he loves each of his children. God does work for good for those who love him. God does reign!