Sermon from Emma Phillips. 19 July 2020

Readings: Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I wonder how you felt when you heard Boris Johnson say that everything should be back to normal by Christmas? Maybe you were encouraged or maybe you wondered if it was possible, but however you reacted, it still seems a long time away! Who would have guessed when we entered lockdown that the Coronavirus would be with us for so long? It seems an age that we have been caught in suspended motion, life going nowhere! I think that many of us now are beginning to struggle with anxiety and low mood as this crisis goes on and on. So today's readings bring a welcome message. I'm going to focus on Romans but I'll show you how the Matthew reading has the same focus as I come to the end of the sermon.

Our reading from Romans begins with the assurance that we are children of God, invited to call him Abba, Father. This is startling even though it probably doesn't equate to our 'daddy' because children of Jesus' time were considerably more respectful of their fathers than we are today! All the same, it radically changes our relationship with God, taking us into intimacy and a family relationship. We are not just precious children but heirs with Christ, inheritors of his glory.

So to start off with be encouraged! Do not fall back into fear, but know that we are precious to God and he is not going to abandon us. The next part of the reading really applies to us just as it applied to Paul's first readers, also facing difficult times - we too wait with eager longing! Paul directs our thoughts to the glory that is to come me, in order to give us strength to endure the current suffering. He tells us firmly that the whole of creation is bound by futility, not by mistake, but by God himself, in the hope that it would be set free to the glory of the children of God. God's hand is over everything, he continues to bring the whole universe to completion through the death and resurrection of Jesus, made visible in the lives of those who follow him. We, his church, his body here on earth, are the bearers of that hope.

I don't suppose that Paul had ever been present at a birth, but I am sure that he would have known just how long and painful labour is - I don't think that much would have been a secret in the sort of cramped and basic accommodation that he would have stayed in as he travelled! So we can be sure that his comparison of the troubles of this age with the groans of labour were not romanticised ideas of new life, but earthed in the hard work and pain of actual birth. Sometimes it seems altogether too hard, we really wonder how God can possibly be bringing new things, good things, out of prolonged suffering. But for those of you who have given birth - did you, like me, want to say half way "I think I've had enough, let's call this off now"? I think most women in labour would like to cancel the whole thing when they are in the middle of it, and no surprise! It's a powerful image, and it gives us hope when we are really down, because no matter what the pain, the birth of a baby transforms everything. God's glory does the same.

In hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

I have two stories of waiting hopefully, both recent news stories. On Friday, Graham and I were driving home from visiting our Matthew, and listening to PM on the radio. They were doing a piece on the effects of the lockdown on our cities, and I was intrigued by two very different views of the future of London. We heard from a business entrepreneur Luke Johnson, who was fining London desolate and depressing without its office workers. He went so far as to say that "if London falls, the rat of Britain becomes a wasteland". In contrast, Nickie Aikens said that the coronavirus may be giving us an opportunity to move on, even to rise from the ashes like a Phoenix. She felt that there has been a challenge in cities for a while, as Internet shopping gains ground and people work from home, but that this final push might open up new ways of doing things and provide the incentive to provide more housing in city centres, much needed, so that the life would come from residents rather than office workers. Graham and I thought that sounded very positive though we wondered what it would be like to live in a repurposed office block - they are very keen on wall to ceiling windows, which don't give you much privacy!

These two opinions come from the same challenge, seen in a very different light. They are both valid, but one uses despair as a motivation to change, the other hope. As children of God, part of God's kingdom plan, we have a hope. We can be motivated by his vision of new birth!

My other news story comes from the Church Times, in a piece on policing in Scotland. Glasgow saw an increase in knife crime ahead of the rising levels seen across England, and started to implement a policy motivated by help and compassion, rather than a harshly punitively one. They introduced a programme called Violent Offender Watch, which offered help to young people coming out of prison. Only half signed up for it, but those who did had a significantly lower rate of offending. Underlying the scheme was a message that anyone can change if they want to. This profoundly reflects the Christian hope of redemption. Love can transform!

We are stuck in the middle of God's purposes. We cannot see the end, not even the end of our short term crisis. But we can be confident that there is hope, that God's purposes are still moving forward, and we still have a part to play. We can be people of hope in our own homes, in our families and amongst  the people we live and work with day by day. We can live out the expectation that love can triumph, that people can grow and change, that the world can reflect God's glory, in the way we speak and the actions we take.

And to return to Jesus's parable of the wheat and the weeds, we can trust in God's timing and avoid forcefully imposing our own judgement. Jesus tells us of a farmer who sows good seed, pure wheat, but an enemy comes along and sows weeds. The word in the original Greek is quite specific - the enemy sows darnel, which is a grass not that dissimilar from the wheat as it grows, but bearing only small seeds, no use at all for eating. If the farmer tries to get rid of the darnel, he risks damaging the whole crop. Instead, he sorts out the darnel when the crop is harvested. This parable might make you want to move on quickly because of the graphic imagery of the burning of the darnel with weeping and gnashing of teeth, but can we take that as a dramatic way to portray the end of evil, and the collapse of evil plans? It is a promise that God will root out evil, and will put an end to evil plans, but it is also a warning to us not to try to bring in God's kingdom by force. We will do more harm than good if we try to impose God's love. We are invited to hope, to persevere in the confidence that God is at work, and that he will overcome evil.

Hope and perseverance are not dramatic and high octane values. They might not seem to grab the world, but they sustain and equip us. Please though, we are not called to a stiff upper lip and endurance without complaint! The whole creation cries out with birth pangs and the Bible has a healthy witness to the need for lament. We yearn with the Holy Spirit for God's renewal, longing to see his kingdom come. But we do not do so as those who have no hope! We have seen his glory revealed in Jesus, we know that love has triumphed over death and sin. So as Paul says as he writes in 1 Thessalonians 4 on the resurrection of the dead: 'encourage one another with these words'.