

Less than two weeks ago
I was in Sydney for the funeral of my wife's Godmother, Mary Douglas,
And today's reading from Romans 5
Was one of the readings for the funeral.
It was a fitting reading for her funeral.
As Mary was in hospital, burdened with a family reunion of serious diseases,
And, although we did not know it at the time,
With death looming near, we talked about what St Paul,
Who himself had suffered much, wrote in today's reading,
And we thought about the way that we as Christians
Do not need to endure suffering as if it is meaningless,
But can rightly trust that in our suffering
God is shaping us to be people who are able to receive his love,
And to grow in love for others.

This is the good news that I'm proclaiming today from God's word:
Because we belong to God,
Because we are in a right relationship with him,
Then we are free to rejoice *even in our suffering*,
Knowing that even in our suffering God is at work,
To grow us in maturity as people made in his image,
And to open us up to the life of love that gives real joy.

Let's listen how the text begins: **Therefore, since we are justified by faith**

OK, let's pause there. St Paul has used the word 'therefore'

Signalling that we are tuning into an argument

That has already been in flow.

If you go back to the previous chapter, you will see

That St Paul has been holding out to us the example of Abraham,

Who trusted the promises he received from God,

And that God reckoned this faith, that he rightly considered this trust

As righteousness, as giving Abraham

An open, honest, and good relationship with God.

This is what St Paul goes on to say: **Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.**

As Christians we read the Old Testament

As being about Christ, and our relationship with him.

This is what St Paul is doing:

He is assuring us that the words

Regarding Abraham's faith and righteousness

Were written also for us, about us,
And that we have the same justifying faith as Abraham
As we place our trust in the Lord Jesus
Who died to take away our sin,
And who lives to bring us into a right relationship
With our heavenly Father.

So, St Paul begins our section of Scripture today
By reminding us of where we stand with God:
We are not strangers or orphans,
We are not enemies of God,
We are people whom God loves,
We are people that God loved even when we were his enemies.
And who now, as people who have been brought near to God
By the sacrifice of Christ, have a Spirit of adoption,
So that we can call to God as 'Abba', 'Father'.

Listen to what St Paul writes:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

We have peace with God: As we trust in Christ we do not need to fear God's anger,
But we can draw near to God,
Knowing that he cares for us, that he hears our prayers,
That he shows compassion on us
As a father shows compassion on his children.

More than this, St Paul says, we can boast in,
We can have confidence in,
Our hope of sharing the *glory* of God:
Of sharing in the riches, the power, and you could even say
The fame of God – I think these rather human realities
- Riches, power, and fame -
Can help us understand what sort of things the word 'glory' means.
Boasting in, having confidence in,
Things like riches, power, and fame, this we understand.
These are the normal things that we as human beings
Want to be associated with:
So, for example, Prince Harry is not a universally loved figure,
But I'd still like to be invited to his place for dinner:
He's rich, powerful, and famous,
And insofar as I'm a normal flesh and blood human being
If he did invite me to dinner, I'm pretty sure I'd tell you about it:
I wouldn't be ashamed of it, I'd advertise it.

Now St Paul is saying that we can rightly boast of our hope
In sharing in the riches, power, and fame of God.
God is, of course, immeasurably greater than human royalty,
And so the freedom to have confidence in our access to God
Is indeed something to be open about.
And, insofar as I'm a person of faith,
The fact that I stand in favour with God through Christ Jesus
Is incomparably more important to me
Than any connection I could have to the rich and powerful and famous in this world.

Well, we are together in this:
We can together boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

But listen to how St Paul goes on: **And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,**
OK. No we are in more mysterious territory.
To boast in, rejoice in, have confidence in glory,
And in God's glory is one thing. But to boast in our sufferings?

Surely if we have a share in God's glory, then we might think, according to human reason,
Then this would shield us from suffering,
Or, if we did suffer, than this would cause us shame,
And make us doubt whether God really is for us.

But listen to what St Paul says: **And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,**
knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and
character produces hope,
St Paul says we, as God's dearly loved children,
Can boast in our sufferings, because God uses them to grow us as his children,
To bring us to be people who know what love really is.

I'll use an analogy that works for me, see if it works for you.
Let's say there's a young woman, recently married,
Who has been living with the freedoms that come
With being young and relatively unencumbered with responsibilities:
Then she falls pregnant, and gives birth.
Her life changes dramatically, and there's real suffering:
Constant broken sleep, subordinating her own needs
To the needs of her baby, relatively narrowed horizons.
She suffers these realities, but through them she learns endurance:
She learns that she can endure as a mother through these hardships,
And she grows in the character of a mother:
She develops the habits of caring for her child
The bond strengthens, the family grows,
And then she begins to see that her hope of seeing her children grow
Into mature adults who freely live their own lives

Is not an idea, but a reality:

She grows a human being in love, a love that involves suffering,

But not meaningless suffering:

What she went through as a mother had a goal,

A goal seen in the life of human growth and love.

Now this is a way of thinking about our own lives

As God's people: There is suffering in life, including the life of faith,

But God is at work in our suffering,

And we can know that through our suffering God is shaping us

First to be people who can endure, who persevere in the life of faith,

And through this, to be people who have a Christian character formed:

Who know instinctively how to judge what is right and wrong,

How to live in the midst of conflict and sin,

Who have a humility that comes from being forgiven

And forgiving others, and who through this grow in the hope

That we ourselves will share in the fulness of God's love

Together with angels, archangels, and the whole company of heaven.

And this is how St Paul concludes our reading:

And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We won't be ashamed by putting our hope in God,

Because even in the midst of suffering,

God's love is not far from us; quite the contrary: God pours his love into our hearts

Through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

In our Lutherans tradition we understand

That God gives us his Holy Spirit through the ways

That our Lord Jesus Christ started: Through Holy Baptism,

In which we share in the death of Christ,

And so are assured of sharing in his resurrection;

Through eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ,

Through which we receive the gift of God's forgiveness;

Through our being called into the church,

Where we together receive the word of God,

And learn to grow in love for each other.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Good News is that the suffering we undergo is not meaningless:

Because we belong to God, he used our suffering

To grow us in endurance, and character, and hope,

And to bring us in Christian maturity to share in the fulness of the love

That is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

To whom be the glory, now and forever. Amen!