

## ROMANS 5: 1 – 8

## PEACE AND JOY

I don't know about you, but there's an air of unreality about life at the moment, as the days merge into one another, devoid of many of the activities which normally occupy our time. So here we are in the middle of June, three months into lockdown. As far as the Church calendar goes, the euphoria of Easter is over, Jesus is risen and ascended, the rejoicing at the coming of the Holy Spirit has faded, we have paid homage to the Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and now we are back in 'ordinary time' a period which stretches from now until Advent, when traditionally the Church reflects on the public ministry of Jesus, his parables and teachings.

But of course these are far from 'ordinary times' in which we currently find ourselves, amid all the uncertainties which continue to dominate our lives. The early Church in Rome also had to contend with challenging times, under constant threat of persecution and forced to meet in secret. It is to these early Christians that Paul is writing in our reading this evening and what he has to say certainly cannot be described as 'ordinary'. In fact these verses from chapter 5 have been described as a 'gold mine of Biblical truth' and hailed as one of the greatest encouragements to Christian believers.

Just take the opening sentence: ***“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by***

***faith into this grace in which we now stand.”*** What a bold and confident claim! We have been justified by faith, says Paul, summarising the arguments he has put forward in the earlier chapters of his letter. It is not by our own actions, by good works, by obedience to the law of Moses, by virtue of our status in the world or by flaunting the breadth of our knowledge that we access God's mercy and grace, but by belief and faith in his Son Jesus Christ. For Paul that is an undisputable fact, one which brings both peace and joy. And that peace and joy are ours to enjoy here and now, not something to be looked for at some point in the future.

Of course once we commit our lives to Jesus and set about living our lives in obedience to his teaching and commands, we will be inspired to act accordingly, carrying out what might be regarded as 'good works'. But that's not what it is about: it's not about seeing how many 'brownie points' we can accumulate to prove our faith or gain favour with God. These same 'good works' do, however, spring from our faith, which is an entirely different matter. Indeed, Jesus commands us to take his message out into the world, by word and deed, just as he sent out his chosen twelve disciples to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick, as is related in the gospel reading appointed for today.

And of course it doesn't mean that our lives will be all plain sailing – far from it. Jesus' sending out of the twelve disciples is accompanied by dire warnings of the treatment they can expect

– hatred, persecution, even death. It won't be an easy ride and they must expect to have a hard time of it. Christians are no more immune from the challenges and troubles of this world than anyone else and should not expect to be. Indeed, I wonder if we would appreciate the blessings of this life half as much if we didn't also experience its downsides? But, as Paul points out, misfortune – or suffering, as he describes it - has other benefits. Suffering is not necessarily reduced through faith but with the help of God it can be endured, we can learn to persevere and that in turn strengthens us, or produces 'character', as Paul terms it. As a result we are sustained by hope, a real and certain hope, not just some kind of wishful thinking, a hope that is fuelled by a knowledge of the love of God and the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit.

I think it's worth remembering that it is very much God himself who is the instigator in all this. It is not so much a case of us mere mortals approaching God on our own terms but rather of God seeking to reach out to us, longing to bring us into a reconciling and fulfilling relationship with himself, freely offering his grace and mercy to those who acknowledge him. And why does he do so? Simply out of love, because he cares for us. The ultimate proof of this is shown by his allowing his Son Jesus to die for us, not in recognition of how good or successful we are but in loving forgiveness of our misdeeds and shortcomings. It was a one-time sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all mankind, an act of grace as freely available to us today

as it was to those who first put their faith in Jesus. As Paul writes in verse 8: ***“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”***

But God's love does not stop there: we have a constant reminder of his love through the presence of the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes in verse 5: ***“..God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”***

Without God's love, there is nothing: Paul writes more fully of the nature of love in that well-known and well-loved chapter from his first letter to the Corinthians. The words are very familiar: ***“love is patient, love is kind... it does not boast... love never fails.”***

As Christian believers we are blessed with faith, hope and God's love, so in these 'extraordinary times' let us celebrate our extraordinary God and his extraordinary message of grace, love and peace.

**Amen.**