
Inseparable

Romans 8:26-39

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 24, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder if you've ever walked away from a funeral feeling really cross. Not so much with God, for taking the person away, but more with the pastor and even the family for not telling it like it was, for somehow fabricating a story about the deceased person that didn't have the courage to look into the reality of how they really lived or the truth of how they really died. It's almost like you want to do the funeral again, because somehow you can't believe it worked the first time.

That's how I felt when I walked away from my aunt's funeral, many years ago. She was diagnosed with cancer and died three weeks later at the age of 70. It was 1987, if I recall. At the funeral we sang happy songs and hymns and the pastor said how strong her faith was and what a great wife and mother she'd been. And I was screaming inside, "But she's dead! Can't you see it? Aren't you sad? Why won't anyone say it?"

But I wasn't just cross with the people who led the funeral. I was cross with my aunt too. A couple of years earlier I'd got myself injured playing rugby at college. My neck was damaged, I couldn't speak for a couple of weeks, and I was told I might never be able to speak properly again. It was moments away from being much worse. My aunt sent me a card with a Bible verse. It said, "All things work together for good for those who love God." I could have screamed – except I couldn't because I had no voice and I couldn't even whisper. So I banged my fists against my hospital bed. This wasn't faith – this was just plain denial. This was a pious, sentimental band-aid over a mile-wide, gaping wound. Two years later what bothered me most at my aunt's funeral was not that I hated it – but that my aunt would probably have rather liked it.

We've just read together one of the most memorable, quotable, and mysterious passages in the whole Bible. Paul brings to a climax chapters 5 to 8, the central section of his letter to the Romans, and summarizes his whole theological outlook. And here we find my aunt's favorite words: "All things work together for good for those who love God." Has Paul joined the conspiracy? Has he stopped digging down to a faith that genuinely sustains us through painful injury and death and bereavement and fear, and instead thrown in his lot with the sentimental composers of greeting card platitudes and the straightforward deniers of harsh reality? Is faith just a groundless, stubborn and counterintuitive refusal to come to terms with meaninglessness and mortality, or what is it really founded on? That's our question today.

Paul gives us two answers. One redefines what we mean by good. The other redefines what we mean by God. Let's start with good.

Here's how we usually think of God. We know we're not perfect, and life isn't always fair or easy, and we can't have everything we want. But that doesn't stop us wishing that could all change. So God becomes the name for how all that changes. Because of Jesus, we get everything we could possibly want forever. And because of the Holy Spirit, we get a pretty hefty share of that wish-list right now. That's the deal. God becomes a device, a piece of technology, that secures for us what we somehow feel entitled to. If things go badly for us, we blame the technology – in the same way that we'd get cross with a spluttering car or a crashing computer. When we get sick, or our relationships fall apart, or our financial situation collapses, or our future prospects look thin, we think the system has failed. Either we haven't been keeping our side of the bargain, or God hasn't.

But Paul is saying, that was never the bargain. When he says, "All things work together for good," good doesn't mean a decent home, a healthy family, a rewarding job, a wholesome partner, and a long life. Paul has a very specific definition of "good." His definition is, "looking like Jesus." Here in this passage he gives us five verbs that describe the way in which the process of coming to look like Jesus takes place. God foreknew; predestined; called; justified; and glorified. A lot of the church after the Reformation got hung up on the word "predestined": but here there's no ambiguity about what it means. Paul says, those whom God foreknew "he

also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” In other words, that was what the whole purpose of God among human beings was always all about: making us and remaking us to look like Jesus. Faith means cooperating with the process.

That’s what good means. That’s what we hope for. That’s the bargain. We get to look like Jesus. Nothing about having a healthy family or a long and happy life. Jesus didn’t have those things. Nothing about a rewarding job or a wholesome partner. Jesus didn’t have those things. Nothing about a decent home or a loyal set of friends. Jesus didn’t have those things. This is the deal: we are conformed to the image of Jesus. If God’s doing a poor job at that, even when we’re doing everything we can to cooperate – that’s when we get cross with God. But bear in mind Jesus was homeless, rejected, betrayed, tortured, and executed. We can’t be surprised if we get a taste of these things too. In fact, if we don’t, we have to wonder if we’re still part of the bargain – if we’re still cooperating with the process.

Let’s turn to Paul’s second answer. I recall going to a seminar on a challenging topic. For a change I stopped listening to the speaker and started looking round at the rest of the audience. The most revealing moment was when the question-and-answer time began. There were about 10 questions from the floor. What I noticed was that none of those who stood up asked a genuine question. Instead, each speaker said, more or less, “Thank you for your challenging lecture – but here’s why the more difficult parts of what you’re commending don’t apply to me.” Then each questioner added in a little about their life circumstances that made it clear why they were a special case. One had a disability. Another was retired. Another was in a second career. A fourth was a particular personality type on a Myers Briggs indicator. The next was a first generation immigrant. Then there was someone who had an unusual learning style. And so it went on. And I came to believe that every single speaker was really saying, “I can’t cope with what you’re asking of me. Please tell me I have a get-out clause so I don’t have to do it.”

And then it struck me that this is exactly what we say to God. We sit in church and we say, “Yeah, yeah – I’m not saying all this stuff doesn’t apply to everyone else, but it’s different for me, because....” And then we go into our own carefully-crafted get-out clause for why we find the claims of God don’t work for us. We react like I did when I received that over-pious card from my aunt – we say, “This is all very nice, but it’s irrelevant and superficial compared to what I’m really going through.”

What does Paul do? He exhaustively talks us through no less than 17 kinds of exceptions for why we might think we are in an unusually difficult place. Here’s all 17 as fast as I can say them: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, anything else in all creation.

Let’s look at them in a bit more detail. He starts with hardship, distress, and persecution. You could say these are the predicaments we find ourselves in through our own mistakes, the trouble that comes upon us through bad luck, and the misery we face because of the ill will of others. That may seem pretty comprehensive, but there’s still 14 more to come. Then Paul moves to famine and nakedness – in other words, lack of food and lack of clothing, two of our most basic needs. Then there’s peril and sword, in other words danger from adverse circumstances and danger from violent attack. Next come death and life, which between them cover pretty much every eventuality for anything we could possibly fear. Then there’s angels and rulers, that’s to say those who’re in charge of this earthly realm and those who hold sway over eternal realities. Then things present and things to come, which again incorporates everything our imagination can comprehend and everything it can’t. Then finally there are powers, which seems to be a sweep-up term for everything that’s preceded it, and, just in case you were still feeling anything’s possibly been left out, Paul finishes off with anything else in all creation.

Notice in this list that these are all things that Jesus himself was exposed to: hardship, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, and all the rest. Paul’s giving us a list of everything Jesus went through, and saying there’s nothing we could go through that Jesus hasn’t first gone through. But

the list has even more authority because Paul has been through most if not all these things himself. He's not just appealing to Jesus, he's offering personal testimony. When the questioner in the audience says, "But I'm an exception," Paul replies, "Well, I'm an exception too." By the end of Paul's list we're exhausted but we're also stripped of all our exceptions and get-out clauses.

Except, perhaps, one. In this long list, there's still one thing missing. There's a lurking suspicion in the hearts and souls of very many people, and maybe you're one of them, that the problem of suffering, disappointment, sickness and grief isn't about any of these things. It's that God has turned away from you. That God is punishing you, facing away from you, or just doesn't like you anymore. That God is cross with you or has lost patience with you. Paul knows all about that last, lingering fear. Paul knows that it's the most isolating fear of all, because it keys into our own profound feelings of self-hatred, and it ties into our helplessness in the face of the almighty power of God. But Paul shapes his whole argument to insist that this fear is finally, wholly, utterly groundless. God isn't against us. Any of us. God is *for* us. All of us. Why else would Jesus have gone through hell and high water for us? Jesus death is proof that God is for us, and Jesus' resurrection is proof that nothing can separate us from God's love.

And so this long list of 17 circumstances tells us two things. It tells us that nothing whatever, nothing we can possibly imagine in heaven or earth can separate us from God's love in Jesus. Here's my list, says Paul. Bring on yours. There ain't anything that can prise us and God apart. Jesus is the glue. But there's a second thing Paul's list tells us. If the point of life isn't to have a designer degree, home, job, family, spouse, leisure time, friendship circle, and the rest; if the point of life is to look like Jesus, then this is the kind of hell and high water you can expect to go through if you're going to end up looking like Jesus – or, to use Paul's language, if you're to be conformed to the image of God's Son.

If you're in distress, and you feel God's broken the bargain that was supposed to make you permanently content, you're wrong: there never was any such bargain. The bargain was, that you become like Jesus. If you're facing hardship, and you think it's because God's against you, you're wrong: God is for you. Always was and ever shall be. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing. God is with you at every step, and Jesus has faced everything you're facing, and you were with God in the very beginning of all things, you are now, and you always will be, and being with God in hardship is always better than being separate from God in comfort ever could be.

I still think about my aunt's funeral, 23 years ago. I still feel her pastor got it all wrong. But I'm not cross with my aunt any more. In fact, I admire her profoundly. She wasn't the favored child in her family, by any means. She went as a nurse to Kenya to give her life in service to others. She spent more than 30 years caring for a mentally disabled son. For much of that time she was caring at home for an infirm husband and an elderly mother too. Nothing in her assumed she had a right to an easy life of security and comfort. She was only interested in two things. She wanted to enjoy the freedom of knowing she'd never be separated from the love of God. And she wanted the Holy Spirit to make her look like Christ.

And she got all she wanted. And if, in my own hour of fear and trembling, she was able to say to me, "All things work together for good for those who love God," then, after all she'd been through, she had every right to. One day, if I've been through what she went through, with God at my side every step of the way, and if I've been made to look as much like Jesus as she was, then maybe I'll have the faith and the right to say those words too.