



**Reading: Romans 8:26 – 39**

**Date: July 26**

### **God's constant presence**

You will have seen the image that is in the order of service for this sermon – an image that I have put up as a sign in front of the church. An image that is a sermon in itself. A great explanation of this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. When we don't know what to say, through the Spirit God hears. And how many of us have been in that place? The pressures, stresses, conflicts, and pains of our life mean that when we come to prayer, there are no words that can make it through the great crush of emotions. Like that image, all we have is a scramble of letters, words, ideas, and feelings. All we have is our groaning. How many of you have experienced, in that time of deep distress, the friend who offers nothing more than comforting presence? No questions or folk wisdom or answers, just a loving presence that hears all your pain in silence. Likewise, the Spirit takes our groaning and offers it as prayer in much deeper groanings that are the language of God. We are all familiar with parts of this passage. In many funerals we hear, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' As important as that is – offering hope and comfort at a time of deepest pain – Paul's bold claim offers much more. Death is one item on a long list of events, occurrences, powers, and possibilities that might be able to separate us from God. And Paul says, 'nothing can separate us from God'. Reading the passage in reverse helps us see that even being unable to string two coherent words together in prayer cannot separate us from God. The spirit is the constant presence of God; able to read our deep emotion and need, and able to speak the language of God in a way that we cannot.

And, in many theological arguments we hear confusion over, 'all things work together for good for those who love God.' It seems to be a simplistic statement that avoids all the suffering and pain in the world. Or it implies that suffering is brought to us by God. Between various translations and footnotes there are at least four interpretations of this passage because it seems that even the ancient scribes were confused about what Paul meant. Considering that God, and the love of God, and the constant presence and concern of God are the main thoughts in this passage, the best translation would seem to be, 'God makes all things work together for good with those who love him.' Which is also an invitation into remaining connected to God through all the trials and troubles of our lives, a connection that is real even when we can't see it working or find the words to express our reliance and connection.

Through public worship, through books, through the Psalms, and through some great passages of scripture, we get the idea that prayer is about words. Carefully constructed, heartfelt but meaningful, words. Words worthy of literature, words that capture our imagination and set us thinking. And in so many ways, that is the worst idea. When the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Teach us how to pray', it is a pity that the only lesson we seemed to have learnt is that set of words. Jesus' example, and the parables and lessons around the Lord's Prayer are far more important than the words. We are in a relationship, and in that relationship, we sometimes communicate in more than words, and sometimes communicate in familiar, simple words, and sometimes in ways beyond words.

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We are in really difficult times at present, with stresses and troubles that begin to look a bit like the list at the end of Paul's words of hope. For some, the issues look like being caught between a rock and a hard place; on one side a potentially lethal virus and on the other side isolation and loneliness and mental distress from the restrictions put in place to protect us from the virus. It is hard to read Paul saying, "All things work together for good for those who love God" in a time when our elderly are denied visitors and our young people made unemployed. At a time of separation, when we cannot meet, we cannot travel to see family, we cannot join for celebrations, it becomes hard not to join with Paul's rhetorical questions about being separated from God. But, at both ends of this passage is the strong assurance that we are not separated from God. In the Spirit we are connected, even when we can't find words, and in the love of Christ, made real on the cross, even the worst we can imagine cannot separate us from God. We do not need fancy words to invite God into our prayers or to convince God to take action. Through faith, we are in relationship with God and all of the issues, troubles, stresses and sufferings that we are going through are taken up in that relationship, understood and accepted and, even when we can't find words, they are communicated in a language deeper and more profound than our groanings.

God is present and we are joined to God in faith through Jesus the Christ. Our prayers are a part of our relationship and we don't need a whole lot of fancy words and long descriptions and instructions to communicate with God. One of my favourite stories from Hebrew Scripture is the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. The main message of the story is the reality of God, a display of God's power to call the people back to their faith. But the story also speaks of the power of simple prayer; prayer that is a part of a relationship. The prophets of Baal spent hours in long prayers and religious ritual as if their god had to be summoned and cajoled into action. And then Elijah says a simple prayer, based in the relationship that he had with God; a prayer that was more for the listeners than for God. Prayer that recognised that this challenge to Baal and Ahab was God's plan and instruction in the first place. God didn't need to be summoned, or instructed, God was present in the whole event. And, like Paul's great hymn of conviction, Elijah was demonstrating that even the people's failure to remain faithful to the covenant could not separate them from God.

Isolation, restriction, fear, feeling like a coal taken from the fire, concern for family, concern for the future, and that feeling that everything is falling apart. I am convinced that none of that can separate from God, and none of it, or the emotional chaos that it can bring, can separate us from God in prayer. The important lesson, one that has been with us from the beginning of this time of restriction 18 weeks ago, is connection. Maintaining connection with each other and with our families as best as we can, but more importantly, maintaining our connection with God. In the Spirit, in love and in concern, God is present and continues to call us into relationship, even when we can't put our concerns, our stresses and our emotions into words. The world is making us groan at the moment, but those groanings can still be prayer to God in and through the deeper groanings of the Spirit; our connection to the ever-present God.

**Rev Ross Pearce ©**

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