**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**July 26th – The 7th Sunday after Trinity**

**“Neither Height nor Depth…” (Romans 8:26-39)**

*Dear Friends,*

*I hope you’re all doing well.*

*This week sees us arrive at the climax of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, the final verses of Chapter 8: a glorious affirmation of the love of God, in Christ Jesus, for us all - and the fact that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from that love. I was struck by the way in which the epistle builds and builds to this theological crescendo, so I included the end of the 3rd and start of the 4th movements of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony in the online service, in musical echo of the scriptural climax!*

*I am having a couple of weeks’ leave from Monday 27th July – Tuesday 11th August, so I am afraid that there will be no service transcript this coming Sunday (August 2nd), or that after (August 9th) Perhaps you may be able to worship on those days via TV or radio - Songs of Praise (BBC1, Sundays, 1.15pm); Sunday Worship (Radio 4, Sundays, 8.10AM); Choral Evensong (Radio 3, Sundays, 3pm)?*

*I look forward to being back with you on Sunday 16th. We hope very much to be back in our church buildings for services soon after then.*

*Go well this week, and God bless,*



**Rev. Tim Chambers
Vicar, the Cranmer Group
Website: www.cranmergroup.org.uk
E-mail: curate@stgilesparish.com
Mobile: 07946 526569**

The Lord be with you **And also with you.**

**The Collect for The 7th Sunday after Trinity
(Common Worship)**

Generous God,
you give us gifts and make them grow:
though our faith is small as mustard seed,
make it grow to your glory
and the flourishing of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Be Thou My Vision**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my wisdom, be Thou my true word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be Thou my whole armour, be Thou my true might;
Be Thou my soul’s shelter, be Thou my high tower:
Raise Thou me heavenward, O power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, the first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, Thou heaven’s bright sun,
O grant me the joys after vict’ry is won!
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be Thou my Vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish c.8th Century; Eleanor Hull

**Bible Reading: Romans 8:26-39 (New International Version)**

**Read by Mike Senior**

*26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.*

*28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

***More than conquerors***

*31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:*

*‘For your sake we face death all day long;
 we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’*

*37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

**Sermon: “Neither height nor depth…” – Rev. Tim Chambers**

I’m going to start what I’m sharing with you all this morning with a piece of music. Let’s listen together for a few moments…

[BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY NO.5 – BRIEF CLIP]

I’m certain that a good number of you will have recognized that, and I’ve no doubt too that some of you will have been able to place it precisely! It’s the very end of the third movement, and the start of the fourth, of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and it’s the most beautiful and powerful musical crescendo that I know. The sense of building, block on block – if we had more time, I’d have played further back in the third movement, as it weaves intricately back and forth, establishing the bedrock from which the final movement launches forth like an exploding firework against the night sky.

St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, I think, does exactly the same.

Over the past few weeks, as we’ve journeyed through Romans - and especially during the last fortnight, as we’ve looked at the first two-thirds of chapter 8 – Paul’s been carefully constructing row after row of theological bricks; setting out for his readers layer upon layer of the basis of their Christian faith.

That the Spirit of God living in us releases us from sin and death to live the life of freedom, in and through the resurrected Jesus Christ, for which God created us.

That each one of us is a child of God, called to live in intimate relationship with the Creator of the Universe, just like Christ himself; adopted as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

And that although the present time is one of suffering throughout the whole of creation – it groans, as if in childbirth, as Paul so vividly writes - this same, entire creation, can live in certain hope of ultimate reconciliation with God.

And now we’ve arrived, in the final verses of chapter 8, at the culmination of it all.

It’s been a really tough time for so many of us recently, in our communities; across our whole country; and internationally. We’ve witnessed – and, in some cases, experienced personally – a wave of grief. We’ve all had to go without many things that, under ‘normal’ circumstances, we would take for granted as part of our everyday lives – going to workplaces, colleges, schools or nurseries, clubs and gyms; shopping; heading out for a meal or a drink; going on holiday. On a personal level, meeting with friends and neighbours, and especially with family – Clare and I know just how much we have felt the absence of our parents, and how much they’ve missed Esther, and vice-versa. And, as followers of Jesus, we’ve all grieved our inability to meet together in our church buildings; to receive Holy Communion; and to share fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

All of this has caused each one of us pain – some, of course, much more than others, as they personally have been hit especially hard by loss, illness or isolation. But pain to each one of us, nevertheless.

St. Paul himself knew, at times, immense hardship. We know from the account of the Book of Acts how many times his Gospel message was rejected, in multiple places. He and his companions on numerous occasions were thrown out of city after city, where they sought to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ; and were repeatedly jailed. Persecuted by the religious authorities, Paul appealed – as was his right as a Roman citizen - to the Emperor, for a hearing before him in Rome. Shipwrecked en route to Italy, he made it to dry land and thence finally to the capital, where he was kept under house arrest for two years. It’s believed, although uncertain, that ultimately he was martyred under the orders of the Emperor Nero. Life for Paul was hardly a bed of roses.

And yet in the midst of all this, St. Paul finds himself able to declare the sovereignty and goodness of God, that, despite everything he has had to endure, he has experienced day after day after day: “And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” he declares, in verse 28.

In the novel Candide, written by the French Philosopher Voltaire, one of the central characters, Dr. Pangloss, despite being confronted by horror and disaster at every turn, repeats the same, deluded mantra, “All is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds.” ….

This is not how St. Paul views the universe. For him, sin, death and evil are real and present. There is suffering and pain in this life. It would be false to suggest that, in some way, everything that happens to us is of God and, in a way we fail to understand, is always good. But Paul maintains that evil will not defeat God’s ultimate plan in Christ; the grace and goodness of God has already prevailed. After all, God can take the sheer malice and agonizing pain of the crucifixion of Jesus, and transform it by the resurrection into the moment of redemption for us all.

More than this, when all around us becomes too much, to the extent that we - as we cry out to God – can neither articulate the pain that we are feeling, nor know for what, indeed, to pray; when this is the grimmest of situations in which we find ourselves, the Holy Spirit, Paul affirms, “intercedes for us through wordless groans … in accordance with the will of God.” God knows, even though we cannot find it in ourselves at that darkest point, how we’re desperate for him to respond; and he himself, through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, articulates without the need for words, our prayer to himself.

So, if you’ve found yourself recently, as a result of all that has been going on around us with the Coronavirus pandemic, or indeed for any other reason, seemingly unable to come into God’s presence and pray to him – it’s all felt too overwhelming; you’re anxious; fearful, even; you simply don’t know where to start – take comfort; be reassured. God knows, and he hears, all that’s in your heart, however jumbled it may seem to you, and however impossible it is to get the words out before him in a spoken prayer. Keep praying, however hard it may seem, because God knows your ‘prayer beyond prayer’, and, reaches out his arms towards you, in his mercy and grace.

But back to Beethoven, and our Biblical crescendo. The music is starting to swell….

From verse 31 onwards, Paul asks a series of four questions:

“Who is against us?”; “Who will bring a charge against us?”; Who will condemn us?”; and “Who shall separate us from God’s love?”

And to each question, the answer, whether explicit or implied, is the same: no-one. If God is with us, it doesn’t matter who’s against us. Who will bring a charge against us? It doesn’t matter – God has chosen us and justified us; there is no charge. Who can condemn us? No-one - Jesus Christ intercedes for us with our Father, and through him, there is no guilt.

All has been done for us, who follow Christ, in and through the person of Jesus, for our ultimate attainment of eternal life, and for us to know the living presence of the God of grace in our lives here on earth, now. Through Jesus; through his presence in us as his followers; we’ve not only conquered death and sin, but, as we participate in his death and resurrection in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, we become “more than conquerors”; our victory through Christ is utterly complete.

And so we come to the very end of the chapter, and the culmination of Paul’s rhetoric of salvation. It’s a burst of magnificent triumph; the final firework exploding at the end of a dazzling display:

“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What an extraordinary, beautiful, powerful declaration of God’s fiercely compassionate love over every single one of us!

NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Absolutely nothing! All of these obstacles are ultimately powerless when confronted with the loving presence of Jesus Christ in each of us.

No matter how difficult our lives might be, God is with us; his love surrounds us; and we know that our eternal future is secure.

So, my challenge to each one of you this morning, is to live like God loves you. Live like a conquering hero – a more than conquering hero, in fact! - because that’s who you are, in Christ. We are all utterly victorious over sin and death, through the one who loved each of us from our conception; who loves us now; and will always love us, more than we can possibly imagine. Live, in the glorious crescendo of God’s infinite and eternal love.

In Jesus’s name, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Jules Humpheson**

*When our songs of joyful celebration
are drowned out by the groans of those in need,
echoing creation,
that's waiting like a prisoner to be freed.
Father we cry out,
how long until the pain and suffering cease?
We pray that your kingdom
would fill this world with justice, love and peace.
Have mercy, Lord, on the earth you created;
have mercy, Lord, through us.*

Father, change our hearts, take our hands, raise our voices;
may we demonstrate your love.

We pray for everyone who is suffering in our world today, through conflict, disaster, poverty, racism. May the leaders who seek truth and justice prevail over tyranny and oppression.

*Still the lonely widow fights for justice
and orphans are exploited and oppressed.
Help us change our culture,
for we're not the only ones who should be blessed.
We must hear Jesus:
'When you show love to those who are in need,
and care for the captive,
it's just as though you do these things for me.'*

We pray for those who are suffering or have died as a result of the Covid 19 virus, for their families and friends and for those who bring comfort to them.

 *Father, you have giv'n to us so freely,
now help us to be generous with our wealth.
All we have is yours, Lord -
how could we only use it for ourselves?
Give us compassion
for those who need the comfort we can bring,
the hungry and hopeless,
who wait for us to practise what we sing.*

Pray for us, that we may follow your example and bring love, peace and harmony to this world, standing up for the oppressed, the poor, the lonely, the sick.
**Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer**

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for The 7th Sunday after Trinity
(Book of Common Prayer)**

Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of thy name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer**

**Played by Deborah Davies**

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me till I want no more.
Feed me till I want no more.

Open thou the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer
Be thou still my strength and shield.
Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.
I will ever give to thee.

William Williams

**A Closing Blessing**

God the Holy Trinity make you strong in faith and love,
defend you on every side,
and guide you in truth and peace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**