

Sunday 13th September 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Romans 8:18-25
Theme: “Coping with suffering”
Be still my soul: look upwards, and onwards!”

Introduction:

Well, it's a moving rendition of the old song, “Be still my soul”.... Let me share with you words of the first verse of this song:

Be still my soul: the Lord is on your side:

**Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;
Leave to your God to order and provide;
In every change he faithful will remain.**

**Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.**

I want to talk to you this morning about what this song is ‘on about’: coping with suffering.

How do we cope with pain and suffering? How do we cope when arthritis comes our way, or heart disease, or cancer? How do we cope when a loved one is sick or dying? How do we cope when someone we love dies?

Our theme is: “Be still my soul”, and I want to say to you this morning that the way to cope with suffering is to “look upwards” and to “look forwards”. This is what Paul is emphasising to us our Bible reading for this morning from his letter to the Christians in Rome, *and in the whole last half of chapter eight of this letter....*

Part 1: Look upwards

A while ago, I came across a book with the same title as that song we heard sung, *Be still my soul*. It's a book written by a Scottish pastor's wife who experienced the heartache of having her husband die from a tumour on the brain. It's her account about how she and her husband and her family coped with the suffering that came their way....

Well, let me begin by talking a little about this Scottish pastor's wife, Elizabeth Urch and how she coped with her pain and suffering.... And how her husband and their three children coped with their pain and suffering....

Elizabeth wrote this book a long time ago in 1964, about four years or so after her husband had died. *So it's an old book, but it nevertheless has some quite wonderful insights in it....*

Her husband Walter was fit man who was rarely ill and who seemed to have "an insatiable desire for study and hard work". One day, though, he collapsed in the pulpit *would you believe*, and after tests he was diagnosed as having a tumour on the brain. Elizabeth Urch writes:

I was shattered. Life for us had seemed to be at its fullest and happiest. Could it be that it was all to end so tragically, so soon? (p.16).

When the surgeon saw her after an initial operation, she was told that he might live for

3 months, or at best, 18 months, and that she should go home and make her plans for his death. She writes about that time:

I went home to our children, and I began days of searching, earnest argument with God. I had always believed in God's power to heal. Now I *demanded* healing of God as if it were mine by right.

My husband was a useful man. God knew how many had been influenced over the years by his quiet wisdom, his deep humility, his clear courage, *and* his transparent honesty. Defiantly I asked God, "Is such a life just to be snuffed out? Surely you have some better, some higher thing in store for us than just this?"

Often when we watch intense suffering, we try to seek some new, some satisfying answer to the problem of pain. I have never really found a complete answer.

I only know that it was through watching Walter in terrible agony that I eventually came to the place of complete submission to the will of God....

I got quite beyond struggling in prayer with God about healing. I was quite beyond asking any longer for recovery. All I asked was that Walter should be released from his sufferings which already had been too great (p. 17-18).

She goes on to write:

Life and healing for so many of us seem to be the most important things of all. Yet salvation and a right relationship with God are of far greater importance. Once we realise this truth we become less

rebellious about sickness and bereavement.

Death does not break our fellowship with God. Dying does not mean going out into the dark. If we trust in Christ, it means going to be with him (p.22).

She is saying: “In the midst of our suffering, LOOK UPWARDS, AND ONWARDS”. It’s an older book, but it’s a good read about how Elizabeth and her family coped with suffering. Elizabeth’s story is a story of suffering, but it also a story of faith in the midst of suffering. It’s a story about people who experienced suffering in the sure knowledge, through Jesus, that God is taking care of them, and that *beyond suffering lies glory*.

That’s what the writer *of the song we heard at the start of this message* knew too, through Jesus. The writer of this song was a Christian woman named Catharina von Schlegel, who lived in the 18th Century and who was going through an intense time of suffering.... In the first verse of this song, she writes about coping with suffering by “looking upwards” and “looking onwards”:

**Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change he faithful will remain....
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end
(SLH 854 v. 1)**

And that’s what Paul is saying in his great chapter eight on his letter to the Romans: firstly “Look upwards!” and “Look onwards” Listen again to some of the wonderful things that Paul says here:

We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

And at the end of the letter:

For I am certain that nothing can separate us from God’s love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

How can Paul write this, and how can we echo this by saying with the Song-

Writer, “The Lord is on *our* side”? ...Because Paul knows, and we know too, the heart of God through His Son, Jesus. Jesus said: **“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”** (*John 14:9; cf. John 1:18; 10:26; Col. 1:15*).

In times of suffering, “Look upwards” to God, and remember as you think of Jesus how much God loves and values you!

Remember the way that Jesus, God’s Son, loved and valued people, and *in your mind’s eye* see Jesus, God’s Son, suffering and dying on the cross for you.... That’s how much God loves and values you.

In times of suffering, “Look upwards” to God....
And “Look onwards” to what God has in store for you, and all His forgiven children....

Part 2: Look onwards

The Song-Writer puts it this way:

**Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.**

That’s what Paul is ‘on about’ in our Bible reading for today from his letter to the Romans: that beyond suffering lies glory.

He writes:

I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children.... For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth.

But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first fruits of God’s gifts also groan within ourselves, as we wait for God to make us his children and to set our whole being free.

For if we see what we hope for, then it is not really hope. For who hopes for something he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (8:18-25).

Paul is looking ahead from this time of suffering to the time of glory that lies ahead, and he is saying in effect, “Look, bear patiently the sufferings that come your way, because they are only for a short time and they are nothing

compared to the glory of living as God's children in His new kingdom". And as Paul writes this, he doesn't only have in mind physical sufferings that come our way because we live in this fallen world. He also has in mind the sufferings that are ours just because we live in this interim time prior to God setting up His Kingdom completely and utterly at the last day. Commenting on this passage, John Stott writes in his book on *The Message of Romans*:

This is our Christian dilemma. Caught in the tension between what God has inaugurated *by giving us his Spirit* and what he will consummate *in our final adoption and redemption*, we groan with discomfort and longing. The indwelling Spirit gives us joy, and the coming glory gives us hope..., but the interim suspense gives us pain (p.242).

But ahead of us, who follow Jesus and who cling to him as our Saviour, lies the glory of 'heaven', of God's new kingdom. Of this we can be certain, because Jesus, God's Son, told us so again and again.

"Don't be worried and upset", Jesus told them. "Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am. You know the way that leads to the place where I am going". (John 14:1-3; cf. 11:25-26; Matt. 24-25).

We can trust Jesus' promises to us, because God has shown us that we can trust Jesus by raising him from the dead. Jesus' resurrection by God is God's affirmation of all Jesus said and did. And not only is Jesus' resurrection that.... It is also a pointer to the sort of existence that we will have when we are raised from the dead. We will have new bodies, but we will be still recognisable....

It will be a new future, a glorious new future, in the wonderful new kingdom that God has planned for His people. Listen to how John writes about it in the last book of the Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: "Now God's home is with mankind! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more

**grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared”.
Then the one who sits on the throne said, “And now I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:1-5)**

I think that it's hard, though, for us to really appreciate how great it will be in God's glorious new Kingdom. A few pictures and illustrations come to my mind as I think about how great it will be in God's wonderful new Kingdom to come.

*There is a story called “The Parable of the Twins” which gives us some understanding of how great it will be.

Once upon a time, twins were conceived in their mother's womb. Weeks passed and they gradually developed more and more inside their mother. As they grew and explored their environment, they sang to each other in joy: “Isn't it great to be alive!”

As the weeks continued to pass, the twins changed further. “What does all this mean?”, one asked the other. His fellow twin replied, “It means that our life in the womb is coming to an end”. “But I don't want to leave the womb”, said the first. “I want to stay here forever”.

“We've got no choice”, said the second, “but maybe there is life after birth”. “How could that be?”, said the first, “we will shed our mother's cord, and how is life possible without it?” “Besides, there is evidence that there were others in the womb before us, and none of them has ever come back to tell us that there is life after birth. No, this *is* the end!” And so the first twin fell into despair, saying, “If life in the womb ends in death, what's its purpose? It's meaningless!” And so the last days in the womb were filled with deep questioning and fear.

Finally, though, the moment of birth arrived. When the twins opened their eyes, they cried with joy for what they saw exceeded their wildest dreams (Lutherans For Life Quarterly Newsletter, Nov. '92)

*In his book, *The Trouble with Paris*, Mark Sayers finishes his book by talking about the joy that he felt and that many Australians felt when Australia finally made Soccer World Cup in 2006. Australia was drawn to play Japan, the Asian champions, in the first match. He describes what happened:

The game began with the Aussies playing well, but everyone in the room *watching the match* felt nervous as we wondered if our bad luck would strike again as it so often had on a big occasion. And then it

did. The Japanese scored a goal that millions around the world -- except the referee -- judged a foul. We were shattered.... The Aussies kept pressing forward, trying to score. With world champion Brazil coming up in the next game, being defeated by Japan would mean disaster. Nothing was going right; our shots messed.... *But* then, with seconds to go *in the game*, the miraculous happened. Substitute Tim Cahill, out of nowhere, smashed home the equalizing goal....

As the goal was scored, the room detonated. Bodies flew into the air and inhibitions flew out the door. The roar lasted at least a minute, and two days later my ears were still ringing....

Before we had sat down, Australia had scored again. We were now winning. This was unimaginable! We then scored again, and the celebrations continued. I could hear cars honking in the street and other households cheering in the dead of the night.... People were hugging and high fiving people they did not know....

Then it dawned on me: *This is what it will be like when God's reality breaks into our world in fullness. This is how this chapter of humanity's history ends.* I wanted to cry. God was speaking to me, telling me that this panorama of unadulterated and complete joy is a glimpse of our future. One day you will wake up, and everything will seem brighter, infinitely better, and the air will be fresher. You will look out your window and the world will be remade. You will run into the street to find that death, disease, injustice, and pain are gone, and you will embrace friends and strangers, barely able to contain your delight. Then you will realize that God is walking among us, that he is totally reconnected to his people. This is our future (*Mark Sayers, The Trouble with Paris, 207-208*).

*The ending of the movie *City of Ember* is a wonderful reminder of the future that awaits us.

The young people, Lina and Doon, together with Loona's young sister, make it to the outside after living their whole life in the underground City of Ember. Initially all seems the same: everything is dark and seemingly dreary still, *because it is night-time*. But then the sun rises above the horizon as day dawns, and the beauty and the wonder of the outside world reveals itself....

*And I really like the conclusion of the movie *As it is in Heaven*. Daniel Dareus is a famous conductor who retires to his childhood town, after

having a heart attack. He starts up a church choir made up of ordinary people, handicapped people, abused people, and so on. He tries to make them understand that “each person has their own tone”, and he tries to encourage each person in the choir to find his or hers....

Eventually, the choir go to Milan for a choir competition. In the final scenes, Daniel goes for a ride on his bike in Milan, then forgets the time, falls, and apparently has another heart attack. The choir has to start without Daniel leading.

A handicapped young man starts the choir singing, *singing his own unique sound*. The whole choir joins in sing musical notes that are unique to each to each one of them....

And then, before long, the whole auditorium is joining in.... It is a picture of heaven, where people from every race, tribe, nation, and language will gather together and praise God
(Rev. 7:9-17).

Conclusion:

The message that I believe God wants to give us this morning is a simple one... All of us have times when we feel down and depressed about life. All of us experience suffering in one form or another, either personally or among the people we love....

This morning, God wants us with Paul to look up, and to look ahead. “Look up” and remember *as you focus on Jesus* that you are in the care of the God who passionately loves you....

And “Look ahead” to the glorious future that awaits us who are His children through our faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

**Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be for ever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgotten, love’s pure joy restored.**

**Be still, my soul: when change and tears
are past,
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last**

(SLH 854 v.4).