

Sermon (SC)
18th September 2022

Romans 8: 18-25

All Creation Waits and Groans (The World Hurts Too!)

Tomorrow's funeral service, for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, will be watched by millions of people around the world. And there is an expectation that the service will be accompanied by a great deal of ceremony and pageantry. As a nation, we expect this, we want this, because as a culture, ceremony and symbol are one of the few ways Brits find it acceptable to express grief in public.

It is not a criticism, by any means, it is just one of our cultural quirks. And it means that tomorrow, in the neat drills and disciplined lines of the parades, we are not watching a performance, so much as we are seeing something of our own grief writ large. And so, when we hear comments like, "didn't our armed forces do us proud," I suspect, what we are really saying is, "they helped me to articulate my sense of grief."

For Christians in this nation, our prayers in the last few days have also been a great insight into our grief. The prayers and services offered by the Church of England in the last week or so, have, rightly, given thanks for the long reign of Her Majesty, but then have directed us to another Sovereign, to Jesus Christ, whose reign shall never come to an end.

Why have we prayed like that? Why have we prayed those sorts of prayers? Each of those prayers, in their own way, show that there is something within us, that longs for permanence. We want to cling to something, to someone, who will not pass away. This is why we are so shaken by the death of Her Majesty. None of us were oblivious to the fact she was 96, but it was rather, because in her 70-year reign we felt the comfort and wisdom of something which endured.

And now, without that cultural touch point which anchored us, we are being encouraged to look to King Jesus, whose reign reaches beyond death. Tomorrow, the liturgy of the funeral service, will point our nation, and for all who watch, to the ever living and everlasting rule of Christ the King.

This term, we have really been looking at the story of Christ's reign as it is shown to us in the Bible. And we see that it is a story that moves from creation, to what the Bible calls New Creation. And it is something which inspires great hope, but it does so, because it is held in tension with the reality of suffering. Christ's everlasting reign gives us hope in the present moment, that our suffering will not have the last and

final word. And today, we come to a bible passage that addresses that tension head on, that charts that course between hope and suffering in a surprising way.

Our Bible reading today says:

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that^[h] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Paul talks openly about suffering and glory, the present and the future, but he does so, surprisingly by talking about creation. He doesn't give us a grand vision of the future such as we see in the Book of Revelation, for example, but Paul talks about the tension between hope and suffering as something which is visibly illustrated by the natural world around us. Here is the thing I want you to remember. For Paul, the whole world was his visual aid. Something about our own human experiences of joy and frustration, of love and pain, are seen every day in the natural world around us.

Last week, we thought about Genesis chapter 2, right at the beginning of the Bible, where the human story was tied intimately to the natural world around us. God gave the charge to Adam and Eve to be stewards over creation. Now Paul talks of the consequences of our stewardship. Today, we see how that connection is impacted by sin and suffering. We are reminded of how the tragedy of the human story impacts the world around us.

That desire for permanence, which we spoke of a moment ago, our continual surprise and shock at death, is because there is something inside us which screams, "this is not how things are supposed to be." This sense of shock is a cry echoed even by creation; even the natural world around us does not function as it is supposed to. The elegance and cruelty of the natural world reflects back to us the elegance and cruelty of human progress. For Paul, the whole world is a visual aid.

In the last 100 years, the impact of human sin and greed upon the natural world around us has become increasingly evident. It has been magnified at a rate which continues to accelerate. Environmental disaster, ecological catastrophe, is evidence of the point Paul makes here - that the human story and the natural world are tied together. They cannot be separated. Sin might be a human tragedy, but its consequences are felt through all creation. And the suffering of creation only reflects back the greed of the human condition.

And so, creation waits, we are told. It waits for the restoration for the sons of God to be revealed. Why? Why does creation wait for the Sons of God to be revealed? Why does Paul phrase it like that? Well - because if humanity and creation share in the tragedy of sin, they also share alike in the promise of restoration. As Paul says,

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved.

Here then, is the transition from suffering to hope, from sin to salvation. Jesus Christ restores in us, *and in creation*, something which was lost. In Jesus Christ, the longing for permanence is satisfied. In Christ, it is not just humanity that finds a hope, but all Creation too. In Christ, it is not just humanity that finds a hope, but all Creation too.

The Bible isn't just a story of God and his people, there is a third major character in the drama. God, His People, and His Creation, and both are restored in Christ.

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We started this sermon by talking about our grief at the death of the Queen. But even our grief is revealing. It shows us our longing for something permanent, for something which will not fade away. Even our grief, is a calling out in the dark for Christ.

In Christ, that longing is satisfied, under whose rule we find hope not only for ourselves, but for the whole of creation.

So tomorrow, as we watch the funeral, and see our grief expressed in the ceremony and ritual of the day, may our thoughts and prayers be turned to Christ in whom our longing for permanence and significance is satisfied. Let us look to the everlasting rule of Christ the King in whom there is sufficient hope, not just for ourselves, but for all creation.

Amen.