

**All things for the Good...  
Romans 8: 26-30**

**Sunday 27 July 2008  
(Lectionary Readings for 17<sup>th</sup> Ordinary  
Sunday of the Year – Year A)**

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton  
Nic Denny-Dimitriou**

*[Service began with Romans 8:38 & 39 – not part of this Sunday's reading, but for next Sunday – and used as part of the Funeral Liturgy]*

Today I want to preach on this extraordinary verse in Romans 8:28, as expressed in a variety of English translations (mention issue of translation from one language to another, to as to render the correct meaning, even when grammatical rules vary from the original language):

**All things work together for good for those who love God**

**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose**

**In all things, God works for the good of those who love him**

It is part of a section of St Paul's letter to the Romans, in which Paul expresses his unshakeable confidence in the greater purposes of God in our lives. He says too, that "if God is for us, who is against us?" and "what can separate us from the love of God in Christ?" Paul says he is certain that nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God – words I read at the beginning of today's service, usually used at the beginning of our funeral liturgy, and which we'll look at closely next Sunday.

Paul's words are inspirational... until they are put to the test of a serious tragedy or difficult circumstances in our lives, or even in the trivial events of what we call "a bad hair day".

Is Romans 8: 28 simply a spiritual equivalent of "the power of positive thinking", a sort of "mind over matter" mantra that helps us cope even with awful life events? Or is it something deeper?

There are two equal and opposite dangers in living the Christian life. One is to assume that God exists simply to make us happy. A sort of divine genie who we can conjure up at will to give us an easy life. The other is to assume that God is distant and uninterested in our lives. But the truth lies somewhere between the two.

A writer called Susan Howatch wrote a novel based around this verse from Romans 8: 28. It was called *Absolute Truths* and the central theme of her book was that whatever happens in our lives – good or bad – it can be redeemed in the hands of the creative God.

In the middle of her story the narrator, a man whose life is falling apart around him after the death of his wife, goes to see a lady sculptor. In her studio is the latest piece she has been working on, a pair of hands beautifully crafted and full of meaning.

The man gets into a discussion with her over the process of making such a beautiful piece of work and she says:

*"Every step I take, every bit of clay I ever touch, they are all there in the final work. If they hadn't happened, then this" - she gestured to the sculpture - "wouldn't exist. In fact they had to happen for the work to emerge as it is.*

*So in the end every major disaster, every tiny error, every wrong turning, every fragment of discarded clay, all the blood, sweat and tears, everything has meaning. I give it meaning. I re-use, re-shape, re-cast all that goes wrong so that, in the end, nothing is wasted and nothing is without significance and nothing ceases to be precious to me".*

As the story unfolds, the man begins to see his own life in these terms. God takes all his mistakes and his wrong turnings and the difficulties of the past and reworks them within his life to create a different pattern – something new and more creative for the future.

This is a powerful image of God as a divine potter forming and fashioning and reforming our lives to make us according to God's pattern, and is found also in the writings of the OT prophet Jeremiah. Within the Scriptures it speaks of the creator and of creation, and of our dependence on God, and our need to be willing to place ourselves at God's disposal in God's overall plan for us.

And as Susan Howatch pointed out in her novel, it speaks of God's ability to take and reshape and refashion our lives in a positive way through even the hardest and harshest of circumstances.

This, of course, is very easy to say once you have come through those difficulties. It is far harder to say it when you are in the midst of them, but even so it is worth remembering.

Arthur Ashe, the tennis star who died of AIDS after receiving infected blood, wrote these words in his memoirs, *Days of Grace*:

*"I do not waste time pleading with God to make me well...Rather, prayer is a medium through which I ask God to show me His will and to give me strength to carry out that will."*

Let it also be stated that God does NOT send us bad stuff and the dark experiences of life. Rather it is that God can redeem the most difficult experiences and bring good out of evil – and we are invited to offer our lives to God in this way. And it does not have to be only in the great and momentous events of life that we do this, it can also be in what seem to be trivial aspects of life.

We would be mis-reading this verse if we assumed that it meant, “all things are good”. Romans 8:28 does not say that everything that happens to us is good, in the sense of being pleasurable. Life tells us that that is not true: Cancer isn't necessarily good. When people hurt us it isn't good. Depression isn't good. Pain is not necessarily good. There are many things in this world that aren't good. [Having said that – some aspects of negative things may be described as ‘good’ – there are even ways in which, medically or spiritually, experiencing pain can be a good thing. However, that is something I will take up next week...]

We need to be careful not to use Romans 8:28 to try to explain the unexplainable. Sometimes we glibly explain why bad things happen to good people, which often unhelpful. Along that same line, we are not called to praise God for evil, sin or death. But we can praise God for the good that God can work in the darkest days of life.

Concluding words:

One of the books in my library, dealing with suffering and pain, is "Why Us?" by Warren Wiersbe, and in writing on this verse, states that...

*"God proves His sovereignty, not by intervening constantly and preventing these events, but by ruling and overruling them so that even tragedies end up accomplishing His ultimate purposes"*

The point is God's loving will. As Paul writes, "If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? I am certain that nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God."

We are people who believe in God's faithful, gracious and loving purpose for us. We are people who believe that, in all things, God is at work for our ultimate good.

~~~~~