

Nothing can separate us...

Romans 8: 31 - 39

**Sunday 3 August 2008
(Lectionary Readings for 18th Ordinary
Sunday of the Year – Year A)**

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

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*[Words of praise – with introduction and explanation – were used at the start of the service and tie in with the overall theme. They appear at the end of these sermon notes.*

*Julia Denny-Dimitriou, presiding at the service, used a differently worded Creed from those we normally use. Those words will be separately posted on the parish website where this sermon also appears: [www.ascension.org.za](http://www.ascension.org.za)*

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Amongst the difficult things we face in life, we can include pain and suffering of many varieties, a fear of the way in which we may grow old or the way in which we may die – and a fear of not being firmly in the grasp of the love of God.

Writing to the Christians of Rome, St. Paul intended to dispel any fears of ever being beyond the grasp of God, for the person firmly in relationship with Jesus Christ.

He reminds us that God is for us, having not spared even his own Son but having given him up for us all. In the way he expresses it, he emphasizes the cost to God in sacrificing what was dearest and most precious for the sake of his creation.

Since “God is for us, who is against us?” he asks. God is not on our side as a subservient ally, or as a mascot as claimed by different sides in battle through the ages. But the gospel events show us that God is on our side; put differently, God has brought us onto his side, and claimed us for himself.

The way Paul has phrased the question is rhetorical, to imply that the only possible answer is: “... of course there is no-one; no-one whose hostility we need fear, and no-one against us who is greater than God.” Enemies we may certainly have, who may be against us and seek our ruin, but with God having demonstrated such love to us we need not ultimately fear that their power is greater than God’s. They may cause us to suffer, but cannot snatch us from God.

The same type of rhetorical questioning comes up again in the phrase, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” It is equivalent to an emphatic denial that anyone or anything will ever separate us from Christ’s love.

Just in case you think Paul is talking cheap bravery without experience to match it, be reminded that the list he gives are all things he has personally experienced, except for the last one mentioned, the sword, implying death.

He writes of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness and danger... an interesting CV of life-experiences.

Perhaps whilst listening, you added your own: You may have thought of financial difficulties, family or personal problems, concerns about our society reflected in violence and crime and any one of a dozen other troubling political issues, as well as the push of Christian faith and morals to the margins of our society.

Paul wants us to know that the difficulties faced by Christian people are neither new nor unexpected, and have all along been the experience of all people, including God's people.

Instead, he confidently asserts, in the face of all these things we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ who has loved us. It is a decisive victory, and a humbling one because it is dependent not upon our own courage, determination or endurance, but instead comes through Christ and his hold on us.

At no point in our faith are we assured of a pain-free or trouble-free life. Life is NOT fair, neither for the pagan nor for the person of faith. I want to make a relevant detour here, to say that pain is not necessarily a bad thing (as briefly referred to last week).

I remember being given a new perspective on the subject years ago when reading of the pioneering work of Dr Paul Brand amongst sufferers of leprosy. It was learnt that the most severe loss caused by some of the diseases generally referred to as leprosy, was the loss of nerve endings. This resulted in people being unable to feel heat, cold or pain, thus they frequently injured and disfigured themselves. In this way, it becomes clear that pain is necessary for good body functioning, and often alerts us to what is wrong or otherwise needed. In this way, pain could be seen as a gift from God.

We can also apply this to other forms of pain – spiritual and emotional – which can alert us to something being wrong, and cause us to seek necessary help or healing. Pain can draw us to God, and make us aware of necessary issues we need to deal with, or be the spur to action in very important ways

We can't be flippant on issues of pain or suffering – one of the issues that most concerns people in relation to life and faith in God – but I wanted to make these points. I have preached on them before, and for anyone wanting to explore them further, I have a library of books on the subject, easy and more complex...

Yet we are assured of God's continuing presence with us, in all of life and in all circumstances. God gives us protection, and of course we ask God to assist us through the maze of difficulties in life; but in a world that is totally inter-related and inter-connected, we suffer the results of sin...

...We suffer the effects of others' sins just as they suffer the effects of ours; and the creation itself is not perfect because its original perfect order established by God has been fouled through spiritual rebellion – as written of by St Paul and included in our NT reading a couple of weeks ago. Christ warned that whilst the world was still under the effects of sin, there would be hardships not only for believers but also for the whole world.

Paul is honest, not offering easy solutions to intractable problems nor implying that the believer in Christ will be spared difficulties. However, he wants us to be assured of one thing:

That we are in the grip of God, a grip that is firm yet gentle enough not to squeeze life out of us; and within that grip, we can be assured of never being separated from Christ, not by anything.

That's a major reason why we can say we are already in a state of eternal life, although we do not yet experience its full benefits and will only do so upon physical death and joining God in the fullness of God's Kingdom.

Paul is convinced that physical death is not a final separation from the fellowship of God, and he couples death with life – life with all its trials, distresses and distractions, and in which we walk by faith in God. Whether living or dying, we are equally the Lord's, since he is the Lord of the living and the dead alike.

There is no spiritual or cosmic force, angelic or demonic, which can separate us from God's love, as Jesus has won the decisive battle on the cross, and the future and final complete subjection of all demonic powers has been assured.

Not even events and circumstances, present and future, nor even physical height or depth, can separate us. It is a reminder of words from Psalm 139, that even the lengths we go to in our attempts to escape the reach of God are futile because God's reach is infinity!

To conclude:

Paul draws us again to the power of God, which transcends the power of humans and of circumstances that appear to be beyond human control. Even the actions of those who disobey God and have set themselves against him are only a temporary display of limited power, and not a real challenge or threat to the power of God.

Paul's message also reminds us that the object of our faith is Jesus, not all the many things or people or events to which we seem to accord such power to influence us.

No circumstances can have greater power over us than God has. Consequently, apart from total rejection of God of our own accord, we are not in danger of being separated from God's love, neither in life nor in death.

And just in case you don't get the message, Paul adds at the end of these notes: "... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen

At the start of worship: Praise (in place of the Gloria)

- Newspapers generally have some good news (inside pages, usually)
- Often very troubling headlines and front pages
- This past week was no exception:
 - PMB to be “closed down” – events related to Mr Zuma
 - Horror stories and accidents
 - Unresolved crisis with foreigners and refugees
 - Uncertain political times
 - Horrific story of baby accidentally killed when a group of children were “driven into” at a crèche; her parents had waited 17 years to have her!
 - Own response – Hannah & Joshua born to us 2 days after our 17th wedding anniversary
- Come to church to escape?
- Church is not a place of escape, but a place in which to deal with all the good things of life AND all the ugly realities of a broken world, for whom Christ died.
- When we come here, we bring everything of our lives and what has impacted upon us, to our personal prayers and our community worship
- We come to acknowledge and worship God, in good times and in the midst of pain and unanswered questions
- Here is a song, in the style of a psalm, that expresses this very well
- An act of faith to say Amen to it:
 - For some – it may be easy
 - For some – it may be difficult
 - Perhaps even for someone here today, it may not be honest to say “Amen” to these words of praise to God, but then you’d be in company with some of the greatest saints and biblical characters that have wrestled with God – and it may be necessary to do that today...

BLESSED BE YOUR NAME

["Tree 63" – Christian Rock Band]

[In reading it out, I edited a few of the repetitive phrases; the song was also played in one of our services earlier this year. It follows on the next page >>>

BLESSED BE YOUR NAME*["Tree 63" – Christian Rock Band]*

Blessed be your name
In the land that is plentiful
Where your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be your name

Blessed be your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed be your name

Every blessing you pour out I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say,
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be your glorious name

When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's all as it should be
Blessed be your name
Blessed be your name

On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be your name

Every blessing you pour out I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say,
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be your glorious name

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say, Lord,
Blessed be your name!

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