

In my role I am greatly refreshed that people are more honest with me than I suspect they've ever been. People in today's society I think cut through the polite conversation more and more and tell it as it is (or at least I think they do). But we have to be honest don't we. There's times of great victory in life but there's also times of crushing defeat. I would so love to say this morning that everything in life is just going to be so amazing, but you and I know that that will not be the case. We all have bumps along the way in life, but I remember one time when I was deeply reminded of those bumps that can be crushing. Alison my wife had found a lump. I can remember sitting with her in Antrim Hospital as she went in for a scan. I can remember as the nurse came out to get me and bring me into what was a darkened room where an ultrasound was being carried out on Alison. And then that moment when the cancer word was mentioned. That was the beginning of a traumatic journey for Alison for the next year of treatment, but also I remember the really tough moment of sitting with her mum & dad and breaking the news to them. So many things were going on, knowing what to do about the kids, trying to manage the issues of how they would react to Alison losing her hair. It's interesting that that was the year, 2013 when for some bizarre reason I had decided to take Instagram photos of that year, a photo every day of that year. That was the year when I lost faith in church leadership, we lost our church family in Coleraine, we had to move house, and then Alison to hear the news in May of her illness.

Up until that point I suppose we had managed everything very well. Yes there were bumps in the road, but nothing as traumatic as this. And yet in the midst of the mess, I believe we also discovered the presence of Jesus, walking with us in the mess.

In the coming weeks we are going to open up our church buildings again for public worship, but if we reflect back on the last 6 months we all have experienced difficult times – some more than others. Some of you have experienced real financial hardship, some of you have lost loved ones to Coronavirus. It's been tough. But what I want us to realise about the tough times in our lives, no matter how traumatic they may be, God is at work in us. I don't believe he is the creator of the mess. But I do believe he doesn't want us to let these times go wasted. Even in the mess he can do something amazing in and through us. Today you might be wondering why I am sitting amongst a pile of bags – well that's because in the worry that many people in our town will have this summer trying to make ends meet and find money to pay for new

school uniforms for their children, here we have bags upon bags of donations. You see sometimes hope is born in the middle of suffering.

Suffering in life, as many of us realise, is not optional. Paul opens up today's passage by saying that "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us". He's saying that we experience suffering now, but there is a glory being revealed in us. Paul reminds us that right throughout creation, not just humanity, but everything is fallen. It is very naïve for anyone to think that once they give their lives to Jesus that everything suddenly is going to be fine. Jesus said, you will have trouble in this life, but remember that I have overcome the world. Paul said also to the church in Corinth in 2 Cor 4:16-18, he says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal".

He is saying we don't lose heart because these are temporary afflictions – it doesn't lessen their pain on us, but they are only for a time. But because of our faith in Jesus our inward person is being renewed day by day, and all the suffering is working in us for a far greater weight of glory that is unseen. Folks, we have a hope that we live by and his name is Jesus.

So how are you suffering right now? What's going on? Are there health problems that are just so hard on you and your family right now? Is it the pressure that you feel placed under right now due to no work? Is it the sheer loneliness of being locked in the house over these months? Whatever it is we realise that suffering is the context in our own lives from which even in those horrible situations God wants to birth hope for us to cling on to.

So Paul goes on in verse 24 by saying, "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently".

If you want to have a true picture of what hope is, then here it is. Hope is us putting our trust in the Lord for things that we cannot see in the future. It's the positive outlook on something that we know we have no control over and yet we have complete confidence that someone else has it. Hope is patient and persevering. No matter what the suffering is, we have a God who is good all

the time, and he can do anything. I wonder do you believe this this morning? We know that no matter what, our God is in control, that he is working his purposes out. Right now if you have a situation that you don't know how it is going to work out, now is the time to walk in the hope that comes from trusting God. Fix your eyes on the Lord, don't focus on the situation. And it's not at all easy, and it wasn't easy even for the disciples. One of Jesus' followers, Peter, fell into the trap of taking his eyes off the Lord. You remember in Matthew 14, where Jesus told Peter to come out into the water to meet him. It says that, 'Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

You see Peter was so caught up in the situation. His situation was distracting him from Jesus. When you can't see what's going to happen next, you need to choose hope - we know that we don't have to hope for what we see, but we hope for what is not seen. Now we can be ready for what God is going to do. Paul writing earlier to the Romans in Chapter 5 verse 3-5, "we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope". In the midst of difficult times God is longing for our character and our perseverance to mature which leads to hope making us more like Jesus. Whatever you are going through right now will you look to Jesus and start walking in that hope. It's my prayer for each of you today that you will be able to say "I have no idea how I will get through this thing right now Lord, but I know that you are able to do a work in my life". Remember folks that with people things are impossible, but with God all things are possible.

It's hard I admit to think that God can bring beauty out of your situation right now, but listen on to our reading today, verse 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".

We learn here that in the midst of suffering we have the help that we need. God has given himself, his Holy Spirit, to help us in our weakness. The Spirit groans on our behalf. What I love about the reality of being in Christ is that we already have the help that we need. If you have put your trust in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in your life. You may not know what to

do but the Spirit does. I wonder have you realised that the God who made the Universe, the God who made every living being, the God who spoke every word into these pages, is living in you right now if you trust and believe in him. He is present in the decisions you are having to make today. Jesus in John 14:16 & 17 said this, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you". In the midst of the suffering you can have hope because God has already given you the hope that you need.

I'm sitting here today in the midst of all these clothes for the school uniform scheme. Who would have thought earlier on in the year that people would have needed these, or the government food parcels, or the emergency baby packs. Our Heavenly Father knows that in a world full of suffering he will always provide.

Now not only do we have the help that we need, let's look at verse 28 of our reading. "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". What we learn here is that God wants us to be more like Jesus. The beautiful thing that God will bring out of suffering, if we don't allow the brokenness to consume us, if we don't allow anger or bitterness to overwhelm us, God's goal will be to transform us to be more like Jesus. In your present suffering, you can trust that it's going to be worked together for good through God. When we can come to terms with the fact that God wants us to be more like Jesus, then we can embrace whatever we go through. We can say, Lord this is heartbreaking but make me more like Jesus. I suppose the worry of our culture and climate at present is that God wants to make us more like Jesus but a lot of us are letting the sufferings of this present time to make us hard hearted. Let's focus less on what we think of God and think more about what God wants us to be through it - he is more interested in making us more like Jesus.

Folks, God doesn't want us to waste any moment, even in the difficult times. He wants to transform us to greater glory. You don't want to come out the other end of your present sufferings the way you went in – do you? You want to come out transformed more like Jesus.

And so Paul concludes this passage assuring us of the Victory that is ours. What can separate us from God's love? Nothing can. We are not just conquerors – it's not a last minute win in the 93<sup>rd</sup> minute of the match – this is a complete wipe out – we are more than conquerors. Jesus has already accomplished all that he needed to do. The Spirit of God is with us. What is beautiful in God's eyes is that we become more like Jesus. Our victory is assured. There will be bumps along the road, but remember that Jesus has overcome the world. That is as true today as it was on the day that Jesus said it. Whatever the suffering is that you are walking through, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus. That is the hope of the Christian faith. That's why in the midst of whatever you are going through, get your eyes on Jesus. Take your eyes away from the hopelessness of what you can see in front of you, and instead look at the hope that you can't see. And we know that God is good even whenever everything is messy.

If you are watching and you are not a follower of Jesus, then how will you ever hope in this fallen world – more than ever you must realise that it has nothing to offer. No matter where you are in your steps towards Jesus, put your faith and trust in him. God wants to do a beautiful thing in your life. Don't let the present sufferings make you bitter. Come to Jesus. Take your eyes off the suffering and pain, and fix your eyes on him. Our present sufferings are nothing when we compare them to the glory that awaits all of us that put our trust in Jesus. That's the hope for today. Let it lift you into this week ahead.