

How is your life right now? I suppose like any of our lives, we all have our good days and our bad days, don't we? I sometimes laugh at the way we in Northern Ireland have phrases that don't quite describe to someone how we really are. For example, when we are asked how we are doing today, we will reply "Not too bad", or "Ah, I'm alright", or what about "Well, I could be worse". It's those funny little phrases that say enough but don't give you the complete story.

And the reality is that we all have bumps along the way in life and most of the time we get through them. But I recall a time when I was deeply reminded of those bumps that can be so crushing. Many years ago as a family we experienced trauma when a doctor mentioned the 'cancer' word, and that was the beginning of a traumatic year in our lives, affecting everyone in the family. There were so many things rushing through my head, like what to say to other family members, or how to keep going. And I know many people in our community have had or are presently going through traumas just like that.

Up until that point as a family 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 can remember how we discovered the presence of the Lord, walking with us in the mess. It's hard to describe it, but God by his Holy Spirit walked with us into treatment rooms, He walked with us in every decision, and He sat very present in our tears.

And whilst I have no sense of what each one of you are dealing with today, and no matter how traumatic it might be, I am convinced with the Psalmist in our first reading who declared "*In you Lord, I have taken refuge*", and he goes on to declare "*for you are my rock and my fortress*". It is a such a paradox, but strangely I believe that in the midst of whatever trauma we go through, as God's children we can also see it as a period of his blessing and outworking in us. Even in the mess of life He is able to do something amazing in and through us. The Apostle Paul was very aware of suffering and pain, and yet in Romans 5 he is able to say "*we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope*".

Every week in our parish through our Compassion Ministries, we hand out food to those in need within our community, we support families with baby clothes, nappies and other items, and we have a growing school uniform ministry. And it often reminds me that in the middle of someone's crisis or trauma, God provides hope, and that hope comes through his people, the Church.

Suffering in life, whatever form that takes, can feel never ending for some. And Paul in our reading today opens 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.

It feels as though suffering is all around us these days ; as we look at our news we certainly cannot avoid seeing it. But Paul reminds us that right throughout creation, not just humanity, everything is broken. We are broken. And suffering isn't selective. It is very naïve for anyone to think that once they choose to follow Jesus that everything suddenly is going to be fine.

But we have a greater hope that lives in us – his name is Jesus – we know he has conquered the brokenness of this world. You will remember Jesus saying, "*In this life you will have trouble, but remember that I have overcome the world*". And Paul said also to the church in Corinth in 2 Cor 4 verse 16, "*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”.*

Paul proclaims that we should not 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 spirit is being renewed day by day, and all the suffering is working in us for a far greater weight of glory that is unseen. The Christian faith declares that there is an endless hope, even in the battles of life, and his name is Jesus.

So how is life right now? If you are truly honest today, is life all plain sailing? Whether it’s the pressures of health, aging parents, the worries of the cost of living, anxiety over our children, loneliness, mental health, whatever it is, how can we truly find hope in the middle of a storm?

Paul encourages his readers in Romans chapter 8 verse 24, *“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. 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 him.

Now I know that none of this is easy, nor was it easy for Jesus’ disciples. One of Jesus’ followers, Peter, fell into the trap of taking his eyes off the Lord. You may remember in Matthew 14, where Jesus told Peter to come out into the water to meet him. And the scriptures say 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. And it’s the same for us; when a situation seems overwhelming, all we can see is the situation before us – that immovable object that doesn’t seem to go away. But when we can’t see what’s going to happen next, we 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. Paul of all people, with his share of trials and challenges, had such incredible strength to look beyond his issues and see what God was doing in him through it.

It’s hard I admit to think that God can bring beauty out of difficult situations 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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”.*

It’s comforting to know 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. Sometimes the struggle can leave us in a place where we have no words to pray, and

yet the hope is there that God's Spirit intercedes with wordless groans. It's that sense that he completely understands what we are feeling. Remember that 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 in the challenges of life, but the Spirit, the Comforter will guide you and be with you. That is such a comfort isn't it? God knew that we would need him every step of our journey in life, and that is why Jesus comforted his disciples by telling them, "*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*".

But not only does the Spirit give us comfort and guidance for each step, but he also helps us in the moulding and reshaping of our character as we trust in him more and more. And so Paul in our reading declares that, "*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*". The beautiful thing that God can bring out of suffering, if we don't allow the brokenness to consume us, and we don't allow anger or bitterness to overwhelm us, is a closer reliance on Him. In our suffering, we can trust that it's going to be worked together for good through God. That can be an incredibly hard thing to consider, especially if the trauma is overwhelming, but we have got to trust God's bigger plan. 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 many may allow the sufferings of this present time to make them hard hearted. So as God's people, we ask ourselves the question, how can I bring glory to you Lord in the midst of these difficult times? How can I be more like Jesus?

Scripture makes it clear that God walks with us in the challenges of life – he is not distant. He will never leave you nor forsake you. In fact the psalmist says "*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book*". God understands.

And so be encouraged that he loves you and walks with you, whether in the good days or the bad. It's consistent, no matter our condition. There's nothing that 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 football match – this is complete victory in battle – 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, fix 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.

I think for me through those bumps in the road, I have always went back to the faithfulness of God. I pray you are able to do the same. As our psalmist declares "*For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. <sup>6</sup> From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you*".

Remember that 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. Amen.