

*Reading Rom 8v26*

Well, friends, what has made you sigh in these last few months? What has been the deep sigh and cry of your heart, I wonder? Some of you will have known personal loss and sickness, perhaps, others of you will have found familiar roles and work suspended and new demands placed upon you that you neither expected nor wanted. Others will just have missed the consolation of familiar company. I don't want to presume on your personal experience of lockdown, but we know that, as a nation, it has been a season of sighing, and longing to be set free, as our scripture has it.

And this remarkable passage from St Paul – in the midst of his grand explanation of new life and salvation in Christ – assures us that God sighs with us. He doesn't stand remote from the world's suffering but shares and voices it, intercedes for an earth 'in bondage to decay'. And in this passage, there is a deep conviction of *destiny* and *purpose*: read v28.

This verse has, over the years, been a blunt instrument in the hands of some believers: almost to make light of their trials and troubles. "It's ok, it's all part of the Lord's plan". That can, if we're not careful, trivialise suffering and misrepresent the God of compassion, who suffers and sighs with us. Nothing, Paul writes, can separate us from this undergirding, indestructible love.

So for him to write that God has a purpose in all things is not to deny the chaos of random tragedy, but instead to affirm two things, I think. First, that brokenness is not our destiny and second, that the shattered pieces of our lives can, when offered to him, be redeemed – be pieced together into a mosaic of meaning.

For Paul, this re-making of our lives is brought about by realising our place within God's family. The language here is all about

inheritance, adoption, of Christ as 'the firstborn within a large family', as he puts it – the Lord's resurrection leading the way to our own.

To be an heir is, of course, to have something passed down to you, which is yours to keep. And this sense of inheritance is also present in our Gospel passage, where – after a clutch of short parables – Jesus likens explaining the kingdom of heaven to bringing out from a storehouse, things old and new.

One of the things that has sustained my wife Rebecca and I during lockdown has been the BBC programme *The Repair Shop* – and if you haven't I warmly commend it to you. Where people bring in old heirlooms and a team of wonderful restorers carefully renew them. It's just a beautiful, hopeful programme: there was one recently where a family brought in a lamp that their mother had bequeathed them, which had been dropped and shattered into shards. The ceramic specialist spent hours carefully piecing it back together so that the cracks became part of its beauty and truth.

For most of us, our inheritance is a mixture of good and bad – characteristics, behaviours, situations that we've just had to deal with. And even some of the best of what's been handed down to us gets broken: family relationships, for example. But the kingdom of God – and the local church, actually, is a repair shop – where broken heirlooms can be brought in to be remade in hopeful ways – so that even the cracked and decayed things can let in the light and shine a path into the future.

So, dear friends, whatever the sighs of your heart, let us bring ourselves again to Christ's workshop, where this master craftsman will renew all things to the glory of God.

Let us pray.