

"Tis impossible to be sure of anything but death and taxes." It's not Shakespeare, it's not Solomon; it was said in 1716 by Christopher Bullock an English actor.

It's a sentiment which expresses, from Preston's point of view, the only certainties in this life. No matter who you are, you will pay tax to the government, and you will, eventually die.

In the passage before us today The Apostle Paul would have followers of Jesus hold a different pair of certainties in tension,

"tis impossible to be sure of anything in this life, but suffering and glory."

The church at Rome faced tremendous suffering. Daily life in Roman culture included and expected pagan worship for simple activities like going to the theatre or sharing a meal with friends.

Immorality was the norm of the day. Drunkenness, orgies, lives of excess, ostentatious displays of wealth, were all very real issues that Christians in Rome had to contend with.

Following Jesus and building community was hard.
It is still hard!

Following Jesus is a personal commitment, and a collective journey.
Building community is about deepening relationships, connecting to share the good news of salvation and loving one another as Christ loves us.

It's hard work isn't it? Over the past three years or so as a church community you've endured a great deal of transition and change, on top of the world being topsy turvy with a global pandemic. As we Follow Jesus and Build community I can be absolutely certain that it will come with suffering and trials. I don't need to tell you that, you've experienced many in your own lives personally and collectively.

Paul wrote to the Church of Rome to encourage them to patiently endure the suffering that they face as they follow Jesus, and build community.

We heard the passage read this morning and I wonder if you noticed that there were three groans which were highlighted in the passage.

The groaning of creation verses 18 to 22.

The groaning of Christians verses 23 to 25.

And the groaning of God to God verses 26 and 27.

This morning we will examine these three different groanings, and we will consider how it is that we can patiently endure a life of suffering, and see God glorified as we follow Jesus, and Build community in this place.

Before we launch in let's pray and ask God to guide us.

Pray

Point 1: Creation Groans

God's created order, we see in verse 19, is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. The creation knows that the day of Christ's return is when the glory of the children of God will be revealed for all to see, as Jesus lifts up his people. When we are renewed, the creation will be renewed with us.

The created order will once again be as it was meant to be, the world will be returned to the way God designed it. God will sit on his throne and reign and we his people, Christians, will work out our creation purposes for and with our Heavenly Father.

But during this time, the time between Jesus' ascension and his return, we read in verse 20 that this world is frustrated, the creation is subjected to futility. The very land we inhabit is cursed. It carries the ugly stain of sin and death which come from the fall in Genesis chapter 3. God's creation and everything in it is marred by sin. The whole of God's created order waits in expectation, as a mother in labour waits for the birth of her child for the time of joy, renewal, and resurrection.

In our world there should be a longing for justice, a desire to see peace and progress and a better humanity. The sad reality is that despite our very best efforts, efforts of individuals or movements or organisations working collectively together, despite our very best best efforts we can't get there.

The world we are living in is not getting progressively better. There are more people in slavery on the face of the earth today than ever have been before in human history, justice mission Australia estimates there are 45 million people in slavery today.

Human trafficking is at unprecedented levels. Pollution and destruction of the natural environment is occurring at the fastest rate ever. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. We live in the grip of a global pandemic which highlights injustice and oppression.

With climate change and poverty, and pollution we can see that our world is suffering greatly. Creation itself longs to be restored rather than being subjected to futility. It is groaning.

But can you imagine the glory that will be revealed when it is released and restored? When Jesus returns pandemics will melt away, the miseries of life here will come to an end.

Although there is suffering now, on that day, God will be glorified as we see and give thanks for the rule and reign of Jesus making all things new.

And that has to challenge how we look at this world as we follow Jesus doesn't it?

We should be caring for God's creation. We should be looking after the good things that he has made and gifted to us. As God's people we shouldn't be people who use and abuse this world for gain or profit.

Nor should we be people who worship this world, and the environment. We're not going to be people who deify this world. We are called to be people who give God's creation a godly care, because God cares for it.

God will release this world from suffering. God will restore the created order to what it is meant to be and in that he will be glorified as we see his goodness and love and mercy expressed in providing all that we need and more in the new creation.

Point 2: Christian people groan

Verse 23 tells us that it's not only creation but Christians, who have the first fruits of the spirit, are also groaning, Christian people groan.

We know pain don't we? Despite being people who are full of the joy of knowing the Lord Jesus, we also experience all the pain of real life. As Christians we are not exempt from the difficulties that come from living in a fallen and broken world. Some of us have experienced the heartache of cancer, of miscarriage, abuse, broken marriages, betrayal by friends, financial hardship... the list goes on. Just in this church there are 1000 other hurts, some I couldn't imagine. We long to be free of that pain don't we? We want to be fully restored, to be healed.

We know the pain of ridicule and rejection. For the Roman Christians, being excluded from public activities like going to the theatre, because they refused to worship false gods... being unable to attend a meal at a friend's because of the sacrifices, or immoral practices observed at parties. The refusal to bow to the culture cost them greatly. Jobs, homes, relationships, their very lives in some cases. We can be rejected too.

And yet our Lord tells us that we shouldn't be surprised. John 15:18-19 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.'

Being despised by the world, experiencing ridicule and rejection, being the butt of jokes or mocked for our faith shouldn't surprise us, but it does hurt. There is a high cost to pay for following the Lord Jesus isn't there? But it's not in vain.

In this life Christians will suffer, but God will be glorified. V.23 tells us we are the ones who have the first fruits of the spirit living inside us, this is the deposit, The down payment, The guarantee. And we see his work in our lives changing us, conforming us to be more like the Lord Jesus. As we see the evidence of his Spirit at work in us we can have a great and glorious hope for the future.

If we have put our hope in Jesus, trusting him to forgive our sin, then we have a sure and certain future with him for all eternity. We have a risen and ascended Lord. We have the

spirit of God living within us. We have the promises of Christ. Promises that we will suffer in this life but also that we will experience redemption, and restoration and healing, and life forever.

That shapes how we build community; we are called to suffer, and to suffer in a particular way. The ESV renders verse 25 as suffering with "patient endurance". What does that look like?

It looks like us tackling all of the difficulties of life with good grace. It means that when a disturbing diagnosis or alarming financial report comes, we don't despair as those without hope but we look to the Lord Jesus and ask him to teach us in our infirmity or trouble. We build a community that is honest and open about the challenges we face, and we walk through them together trusting the Lord no matter what the outcomes.

The world groans as it suffers and waits for regeneration, Christians groan as they suffer and are conformed to be more like Jesus, but we do not groan alone.

Point 3 God Groans to God

In verse 26 we read these words "likewise the spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." God groans to God.

Usually in terms of our prayers and our groaning we think of a one-way relationship. We pray and our groans go up to the Lord in heaven, but here we see a different picture.

God by his Holy Spirit is helping us, he's lifting us, he's turning our hearts back to our Heavenly Father. When we are weak, when we feel like we are filled with despair, the Spirit himself inclines our hearts to God, when we don't even have the words, or when what we ask for is not going to be the best thing for us, through our sobs and our tears, God's Spirit living inside us intercedes for us. The closeness we have with the God who loves us is astounding. That he would live like this with us is an amazing demonstration of his deep love for us. What an amazing gift of following Jesus.

The Holy Spirit reframes our prayers and realigns them so that what we truly need in a time of suffering, to be more like the Lord Jesus Christ, is what we request.

Even here in this groaning of God to God, God is glorified as his Holy Spirit works on our behalf that we would ask for the will of God in our lives and so we see in verse 28 that even in times of great suffering we know that 'all things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.'

In the deepest moments of our suffering, in the face of trials by fire and flood, God is at work. In the tough things of 2020 even though we can't see them yet, they will work for our good and the glory of God, because we are assured here that he is working out his purpose in us.

Tim Keller summarises verses 29 and 30 beautifully.

'Verse 30 is breathtaking. God foreknew his people—before the beginning of time, he knew us in a relational, loving sense. He set our destination, planning for us to be with him in glory. Then, at a particular point in time he called us to have faith in him. As we believed, he justified us—declared and treated us as righteous and blameless. And one day, he will glorify us—make us perfect in body and soul. This lies ahead of us—but because it relies on God's action, not ours, it is so certain that Paul speaks of it in the past tense, as though it has already happened.'

And that is why we can suffer with patient endurance as followers of Jesus.

Because all people God begins this process in, he will see it to completion in.

Those who are saved and submit to the rule and authority of God in our lives, who are conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus, we do so to the glory of God. What a vision of the community we are to build!

As we follow Jesus, as we build community we will suffer, but God will be glorified.

Pray