

Sermon for Sunday, 19th July 2020

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Romans 8:12-25 & Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43

Christmas! It's just 5 months away!

Probably a little bit early to be asking what you're hoping to find under the Christmas tree!

But you know how exciting Christmas is: you're hoping that your parents might have got you that amazing toy or game you've wanted for ages. You're not totally sure but you really hope they have. And, then there's the waiting! Oh, the waiting and the counting down of the days until Christmas Day - the waiting seems to go on forever (not if you're an adult, I have to say - then Christmas just hurtles towards you with alarming speed).

Hoping and waiting. It may not be Christmas, but I wonder if there's something you've been hoping and waiting for recently?

St Paul, in his letter to the Christians living in Rome, is thinking a lot about "hope" and "waiting".

He was writing to people who were going through very difficult times. They were being treated badly because of their faith in Jesus Christ, and life was very hard. Twice, Paul mentions their suffering. And what's more, Jesus, the one for whom they were suffering, and who had promised that he would return, hadn't yet come back. They'd had to wait far longer than they'd ever imagined they would. Life was getting harder, not easier for them. And maybe some of them were beginning to get tired of waiting; you know what it's like when you've had to wait for a long time. We can begin to lose hope and lose sight of what we're waiting for. We maybe even forget what it was we were hoping for.

But Paul says, it's exactly when we feel like giving up hope that we need to keep hoping:

"Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

What was it that Paul was encouraging the Christians in Rome to keep hoping for? The clue in my bible is in the little title that heads this passage: "Future glory". He's talking about how they and we need to keep believing in what God has promised to everyone who believes in Jesus: that one day, he is coming back, and one day we will share eternal glory with him. A little bit more about that in a moment.

But just for a moment, I want you to think about what we usually *mean* when we say we're hoping for something to happen.....

I wonder what you decided you mean when you talk about hoping for something. "I do hope I catch the train...but I've left it rather late to get there on time". Or a "I do hope I've done well enough in that interview to get the job" kind of hope. We're looking into the future and desiring something might happen - but can't be sure that it will. There's uncertainty.

When Paul and other New Testament authors talk about hope, it has quite a different meaning to how we usually understand it.

Hope in the Bible is not about blowing out the candles on our birthday cake and making a wish for something we'd like to happen.

Hope in the bible is a confident expectation of receiving what God has promised (Paul says in verse 19 that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of glory to be revealed.."). It's not about the strength of our desire, but about trusting in the unchanging promises of God, who is faithful to keep his word. That's very different.

So, let's dig a bit deeper to find out what exactly Paul was encouraging the Roman Christians to hope in.

Verse 18-21

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the **glory that will be revealed in us**. The creation waits in eager expectation for **the sons of God to be revealed**. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the **glorious freedom of the children of God**."

And a little further on in the passage, Paul says "we wait eagerly for our **adoption as sons (or adoption to sonship), the redemption of our bodies**. For in this hope we were saved."

Paul talks about the glory that will be revealed in us; the sons of God to be revealed; the glorious freedom of the children of God; adoption as sons.

Just a small but important point here. That phrase, "Adoption as sons" OR "adoption to sonship of God" - Is Paul saying that this great hope of glory is only for men? No, of course not. Paul's choice of the word son, and adoption to sonship or the spirit of sonship is very important here, because he's trying to make a specific point. In the Roman world in which Paul was living, an adopted son was one chosen specifically by his adoptive father to inherit his estate and continue his name; he was in no way lesser than a son born to the father. And the Greek word which translates as "spirit of sonship" refers to the full legal standing of an adopted son. The point that Paul was trying to get across to us, is that God has chosen each of us, has deliberately brought us into his family in his great love, and has given us the full status of one who will inherit his kingdom. That's some honour!

So, we are hoping expectantly for the glory that will be revealed in us; the sons of God to be revealed; the glorious freedom of the children of God; adoption as sons.

But if that's what we're looking forward to and hoping for, does that mean that at the moment we're not God's children? Didn't Paul tell us that we're already God's children and sons of God?

Verse 14

"...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.....for you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children..."

It's really clear: Anyone who has put their faith in Jesus Christ and has the Spirit of God in them, is a child of God (PRESENT TENSE).

You received the Spirit of sonship - PAST TENSE. It's already happened!

By him, we cry Abba Father; we are God's children - PRESENT TENSE - today, you and I can call out to God as our heavenly Father.

We have already received these things, Paul says. And yet, he says we're also waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons. So, how can we have received these things and at the same time be waiting and groaning for them to happen? As Paul says, you can't still be hoping for something that you already have! Confused.com?

The key lies in another word that Paul uses in verse 17:

Verse 17: "Now, if we are children, then we are **heirs** - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Today, we can say confidently, through faith and the Spirit living within us, that we are children of God. But as children, we are also heirs. And this is the key word. For an heir is someone who is waiting to receive what is promised to them. Prince Charles is heir to the British throne. He became heir apparent 68 years ago, when his mother became Queen. Until he becomes King, he must continue to wait for that day when all the fullness of kingship that is promised to him is conveyed upon him

An heir is someone who is "legally entitled to the property or rank of another on that person's death."

We are already God's children, and have received the spirit of sonship. And that means we are heirs - even more, we have been made co-heirs with Christ!! And we will receive the full rights and privileges of being sons, not on Christ's death (because he has risen and is alive!), but on our own death when our bodies will be redeemed and resurrected or, if Christ returns before we die, on that glorious day when he comes in all his glory.

At the Church of England's Funeral service at the Committal, the Minister says: "We commit our brother / sister to be buried / crematedIn sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body..." It's there isn't it: that same firm hope in the promise that our bodies as well as our spirits will be redeemed by Jesus, by the one whose own body has been gloriously resurrected and transformed; through him we too will be transformed to share in all his glory. And on that day we will enjoy the loving embrace of our Father in heaven, and be able to look into his eyes, and be held in his arms.

What an amazing hope that is! Wow! No, no one looks forward to death, or the process of dying, but what an incredible joy we have to look forward to after our death.... sharing with and in Christ's glory! We're co-heirs with him. That's why Paul talks about the "*glorious* freedom of the children of God".

So, what difference does this hope make to us today? The Christians who Paul was writing to in Rome were facing many trials, including increasingly severe persecution for their faith. In this life, we too will face many trials and difficulties. Some of us are facing great trials right now.

We're certainly not immune to the suffering and pain that everyone experiences here on earth. Like the weeds and the wheat in Jesus's parable, before the time of Harvest, we all live and grow together, all experiencing the rain and the sun, the conditions of every day life. And in fact, at times, we may suffer more because of our faith. Indeed, some of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being persecuted terribly today.

So, there may be times when we feel we're suffering more because of our faith. But, the promise is that if we live as those led by the Spirit of God, if we commit ourselves to doing his will rather than the will of our sinful nature, and if we share in Christ's sufferings....then we also share in his glory.

Hope of the glory that is to come helps to sustain us in the challenges of the present time. And what we experience in part through faith today (our being God's children, able to call God our Father), will one day be ours in all its fullness and glory.

As Jesus promises in his parable, on the day when his Kingdom comes in all its fullness, the "righteous (that is those saved by faith in him) will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." We, the sons of God, shall be revealed and shall enjoy our new, glorious freedom.

Don't we all long for the day when we no longer have to hope, and no longer have to live by faith? That day is going to happen, the day when Jesus Christ returns, as he has promised, and is revealed in all his glory. On that day, all his promises will be fulfilled and we will see him face to face. We will see God and be with God in all his glory. All our waiting and longing and groaning will be over, hope and faith will no longer be needed. Don't you look forward to that glorious day?

If you're the kind of person who finds acronyms helpful to remind you of something, here's some acronyms for hope that I found online that might help you to remember the truth of Christian hope:

Hope is:

- H Holding
- O on to
- P promises (of God)
- E even though

Hope is: (John Maxwell)

- H Holding
- O on
- P praying
- E expectantly

Hope is:

- H Hold
- O on
- P Pain will
- E End

Perhaps you can come up with a different acronym for HOPE that will help you remember

(And whether you're a child or an adult who enjoys thinking more about something through being creative, there's a simple colouring activity that you might like to use or copy from our website, if you're not on our e-mail list and so haven't already received.)

CHRISTIAN HOPE - is holding on to the promises of God, even though life is sometimes really hard..... CHRISTIAN HOPE is holding on, in the midst of trials, because we know that pain and suffering will end and fullness of joy in God's very presence will be ours. CHRISTIAN HOPE is holding on, praying expectantly, confident of that eternal glory that is to come. **Amen.**