

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Trinity Sunday

12th April 2022

The bit of chapter 5 of Romans that was the second reading is one of my favourite bits. It's not obvious what it has to do with the Trinity. It doesn't mention the Trinity. The bits where it's not obviously about the Trinity are often where our understanding of God in Trinity is strongest. The bits where it's obviously about the Trinity can lead us to try to contemplate God as some kind of object in three parts, and at those times our understanding of God in Trinity is nearer the surface, but I would contend that it is weaker.

This morning I am going to go on talking about the Letter to the Romans, chapters 1 to 8. God in Trinity runs right through it, under the radar. So while I do, when the subject of God comes up, keep asking yourself – how are we encountering God here? Source of all being, eternal Word, or Holy Spirit? Who is at work?

So: the Letter to the Romans. Mostly Paul writes letters to churches he knows. He writes to the churches in Corinth or Galatia. He knows these people, he's stayed in their houses, he's brought them together. And then he moves on, but he keeps in touch and he writes them letters. Mostly he starts off the letters to these churches by telling them what mistakes they've made since he took his eye off them.

The letter to the Christians in Rome, the Epistle to the Romans, is different. He hasn't been to Rome yet. We're not sure why he writes to them. But we have the letter so we know what he says. And it goes like this. He hasn't been there, so he doesn't start with the Christians in Rome and how they are and what they've been doing wrong since he saw them last. He starts with God. In the letter to the Romans Paul writes about God and what he thinks God is up to.

What is God up to?

Creating the universe. That's where Paul starts. Time and space, height and depth, things present and things to come, everything in all creation. It all has God written through it like Blackpool rock. If we paid any attention to the universe, says Paul, we would notice this. That's chapter 1.

Chapter 2. This is fantastic news. God is for everyone, for all of us.

So where is there any problem? Who can be against us? Chapters 3 and 4. Ourselves, says Paul, we can be against us. We get in our own way, we fall short, we are never going to be at peace with God - or even with ourselves - if we don't get some help.

Chapter 5: the good news is, we have some help. Christ Jesus, who died, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, intercedes for us. Even if we are against us, Christ is on our side. Chapter 5 is the one we had a bit of today.

There's a bit of a pause in Chapter 6, while Paul establishes that just because Christ is on our side that is not a licence to carry on doing all the things we know are wrong. And then

that carries on into Chapter 7 while he thinks about what it's like to live two lives at once, the life we live as ourselves and the life we live in Christ. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Ourselves - the answer is still ourselves - we are pulled in two directions and it gets confusing.

And so we arrive at Chapter 8, which is where we were last week when we were concentrating on the Spirit of God. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? And by now you know Paul's answer. Ourselves, you will be thinking, the answer is ourselves. Ourselves, yes, but everything else will have a go as well. Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, poverty, danger, execution. The worst that humanity can throw at us.

Paul is not saying we are exempt from all this, it will not happen. It will happen, he's saying, and it cannot separate us from Christ. Come to that, the whole universe - time and space, height and depth, life and death - we are not exempt from the universe either. But nothing in all creation can separate us from Christ. It may have a good go. We will be pushed off balance, lose our way, run out of steam. But God will still be there, breathing life into us, reminding us who we are, pulling us along. God will be right alongside us, nearer than breathing.

We started with what God is up to and we've arrived at what it's like to be human. We are vulnerable but we are loved. We are pulled in all directions but we have help. We get in our own way but Christ is fighting for us. Everything may be against us but God is for us, beside us, within us.

Paul is telling a story about us. But this morning you have been listening to it as a story about God, about how God is in this story. God the Maker makes us. Then we fall over. Christ, in whom is the love of God, rescues us. Then we don't know what to do next. The Spirit, which is the Spirit of God, prompts us. God makes us and meets us and calls us. God makes us in love, restores us in grace, calls us into communion. God is source and journey and end. There's a movement in it. God is poured out in love to gather us in. God is spoken in Word to bring us home. This is what we learned, some time after Paul, to call God in Trinity. It's the dance of God, and we are swept up into it.

Go back for a moment to the second reading. This is a bit about suffering, about when things are tough. What use is the doctrine of the Trinity when things are tough? What does the Trinity have to do with the price of fish?

But there in what Paul is saying is this sense of movement, God answering God, God who is light breaking in on the darkness where, beside us, God already is. Suffering produces endurance, says Paul, and endurance produces character - and then God breaks in again from a new direction, the last direction you would expect. Character produces hope. We are set free into that hope; we are caught up again in that movement that is the community, the Trinity of God.