

2nd Last Sunday: Romans 8:18-23 [13.11.2016]

Christ our Rock!

¹⁸ Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. ¹⁹ For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. ²⁰ Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, ²¹ the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. ²² For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. [NLT]

Nobody would dream of starting an advertising campaign by highlighting the negative aspects - except the church. Paul writes here about **what we suffer now** - there is no covering over the hard facts of a life of faith. It's like an interview I heard with a man who had met with Christians who had converted from Islam in Islamic countries. Apparently they are asked 2 questions before they become Christians: Are you prepared to suffer for Christ? And the second question: Are you prepared to die for Christ?

How would you react, if those were the prospects you had for becoming a Christian? Would you choose to follow this Lord, who could not even guarantee your well-being here in this world? Of what use is a faith that does not hold out the promise of a good life here in this world - of being kept safe and of having what we need?

Our faith does not give us a guarantee of security in this world. What we profess as Christians is in spite of what we often experience in this world - that

Christ is our Rock!

Many of us may stumble over the fact that we still have difficulties - in spite of being saved, in spite of trying so hard to live as believers. We might think that this means that there must be something wrong with our faith - that we are

to blame if things don't change in our lives.

What do you say, e.g., to a person who has a debilitating disease like muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis - or any of the diseases for which there is only a steady decline in prospect for the sufferer? Why is it that some people seem to suffer more than others - did they not believe enough?

Contrary to what some groups would have us believe, believing in Jesus Christ does not simply give us a trouble-free life. Quite the opposite may be the case.

Paul writes at some length about the change that has taken place in you and me, since we have been saved by faith in Christ. Yet, he also keeps on pointing out that, for the present, we are still part of this world. Part of this world where the influence of sin is still very apparent - and where those who have received the new life from Christ are still subject to the destructive power that sin wields.

The difficulties of a life of faith that Paul alludes to here - and as I pointed out at the start - are not only due to physical challenges, but also of being persecuted for the faith. In the early church there was no legal protection for the believers. For those living in the capital of the Roman Empire it may have been especially hard. Paul's advice to them is not to flee Rome, but to trust in Christ and his promises.

There is no easy way out when we confess our faith in Christ. For us it may not be that our faith is forbidden here in our country, but I'm sure that there have been times in your life when you have had to make hard choices: a choice between remaining true to your calling as a child of God, or of doing what 'everyone else' is also doing. The suffering we endure as Christians in our society may not be that we have to fear death, but that we must fear 'losing out' on opportunities. That may be in business, or when you get an offer to have a job done - and it is cheaper by at least 14% if you pay cash!

There is no simple answer to the question why Christians still suffer. I can only compare it to a ride on a roller-coaster: as you rise to the top, everything

seems to be safe - its almost as if you can let go and wave. At the top of the ride everything seems to be in equilibrium - almost as if we have things under control. But as you go down the steep slope you have to hang on tightly. Perhaps that is how our life of faith also is - when things go well, we believe that we have things under control, but when our life takes a downward turn - when we go through suffering, when it seems as if the bottom has fallen out of our world - we have to hang on to God, and his promise to get us through this.

'You will get through this' - that was the title of a Bible-study series we did recently. Using the story of Joseph, Max Lucado shows how God shaped the life of Joseph through the difficulties of being betrayed by his brothers, and sold into slavery; how - in spite of being faithful to God, and refusing the charms of his master's wife, he is falsely accused and ends up in prison; in prison he asks the wine steward to remember him when he is freed, after he had explained what his dream meant.

We read through the story of Joseph in one (short) sitting, but what is set out there took many years of pain and mental anguish. When he finally sees his brothers again, he is not yet ready to forgive and make himself known to them - the pain they had caused was so great, that not even in his current state he was able to do so. Only at the second meeting did he drop his mask and send for his father. The story does not end there - after the death of Jacob the brothers fear that Joseph will now punish them, but he assures them of his forgiveness, and that all had been part of God's plan.

All is part of God's plan. As with a ride on a roller-coaster, things only get to be smooth again when the ride has ended. Paul makes it clear that in this sin-troubled world we will experience hardship and pain. There will be problems that at time threaten to totally overwhelm us. That does not for a moment mean that God's promises of new and complete life suddenly fall flat. It may be that there will be a change here in this world - as it happened to Joseph where you experience healing, or when things in your life become easier. But we are to know that although we have this new life - it will only be fully

apparent once eternity has begun.

When you are tired and can hardly carry on in the middle of a long hike / marathon / cycle event, the thought of finishing, of the goal, can give you new strength and the determination to carry on. Paul says here, **what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he [God] will reveal to us later.**

We are to realise that this world and all our suffering here will pass away. The only permanent feature is the Word of our Lord - his promise that he loves us, and of the forgiveness he gives us. In the midst of the uncertainty we may so often feel, we are to look to this sure Word of God, we are to remember his promise to be with us - no matter what may be happening.

God's Word promises a better future than the present we have right now. The Bible does not give us much detail in this regard - its like trying to explain a picture rich in colour to a blind person. It is the future where **God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us.**

That is our hope, that is what we long for - the place where what we believe now will become visible to all. A place where there is no more sin, or pain, or suffering. The place where our deepest longings will be fulfilled.