

God, in Love, Ruling over Ruins

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God's Greater Story / Suffering; Glory; Hope / Romans 8:28–39

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you go to Coventry Cathedral and stand before the altar, you will be overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by the tapestry that rises above you. The scene is Christ enthroned in glory. A pale and wounded Christ is seated on a throne. Surrounding him is a band of gold that branches into four corners. And in each corner is a symbol of one of the evangelists. The four evangelists give us one vision: a vision of the wounded Christ ruling over the fallen world. The sheer size of the tapestry makes it overwhelming. It is about the size a tennis court, hanging in the air. It took 12 weavers 3 years to complete. And yet, this woven picture of Christ, enthroned in glory, having above the altar, overwhelms in another way. It overwhelms us with God's love.

What Graham Sutherland did with thread in this tapestry is what the apostle Paul does with words in his letter. This morning, we consider one of the well-known and most beautiful passages of Paul in Romans. A time when he has woven together all of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - with all of creation - death and life, angels and demons, present and future, things seen and unseen. All of God rules over all of creation in love. That's what the Apostle Paul wants us to know. Paul takes us to the end of the story of God, which is really not an ending at all but a new beginning, a glorious re-creation of all things and the final victorious revelation of God's people as more than conquerors in his love.

Yet when we read the words of the Apostle, something interesting happens. It is not as if we are standing there, at the foot of this tapestry, looking up at an overwhelming figure. No, it is as if Paul has invited us upward so that we are with the figure of Christ in the tapestry and, from there, has asked us to turn around and see what Christ sees. Paul wants us to see the world through the eyes of Christ for he knows that the vision will change your life.

So often, when we come to church, we come with a limited vision of God. We look at God through our experience of life and that limits what we see. Did he answer MY prayers this week? Did he give ME strength to deal with work? To handle our kids? God can become small. Small enough for us to fit him into our lives. Once a week. Sunday. Whereas Paul wants to change our perspective. Paul wants us to experience a reversal. We don't fit God into our lives.

No, God brings us into his life, his love, his rule of the world. Paul asks us for just a moment to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Let Paul bring you to God, in love, ruling over ruins.

Ruling over ruins. Seems so appropriate right now. God in love ruling over ruins.

Paul's words remind us of the ruins of this world. The ruins outside the Christians and the ruins within. Paul names those things people fear would separate them from God. Tribulation, distress, persecution. Famine, nakedness. Danger and sword. And these are not just words for Paul. No, Paul is naming the reality of what he has seen in his ministry. He, himself, is journeying toward Jerusalem, carrying a gift for the poor who are suffering under famine. Paul has been in prison. He has suffered tribulation and danger. He knows how the world fights against God's people. The evils, however, are not only those that stand outside the Christian. Paul knows there is evil within. He himself stood there and watched Stephen be stoned...and approved it. Paul knows this hatred and abuse from the inside. He himself could easily stand there, guilty before God, accused of his sin.

Paul invites us here in Romans to bring it all before God - the evil that stands outside, the forces that threaten to destroy you, the loss of a job, the anxiety over Covid, the fear over the true issue of racism, the death of a child, the tragedies that you know you will never get "Over". Paul invites you to bring these before God. He also asks you to be honest about the evil within. We stand before God, suffering from a world in ruins but also suffering from our own sins. The distance that lies between you and your son, the anger that brews between you and a co-worker, the greed that causes you to turn a blind eye to someone in need. The lack of love for your neighbor...whether it's Covid related or race related or some other tension. Paul asks us to bring this all before God, the evil without, the evil within, to gather it up and place it before the throne of God, sure that there is not enough time or space to hold all of the evil and suffering we bring. Paul asks us to bring that before God because Paul knows what God in Christ is bringing us. Love!

While we bring all of our evil before God, God brings all of his love to us. Paul knows that God is ruling over the ruins of this world in love.

If you were to go to Coventry Cathedral and stand there, below the tapestry, looking away from it, toward to the church, it is amazing what you would see. As Jesus looks from the tapestry, he see a church in ruins. Coventry Cathedral is a church built upon ruins. On November 14, 1940, the city of Coventry was bombed. It experienced the blitzkrieg, the nighttime horror of Hitler's Luftwaffe in World War II. In one night, this cathedral, this place where people had worshiped for almost 900 years, was reduced to charred wood and ruined stones rising from the earth in columns of smoke.

Jack Forbes, a stonemason at the time, looked over the ruins and saw two medieval timbers, charred from the fire, and fallen to the ground in the shape of a cross. They took these timbers and placed them, as a cross, on top of a pile of rubble, making an altar before the wall of

shattered stones. Behind them, they placed the words, "Father forgive." Then, a new cathedral was built extending off of the old ruins. This tapestry hangs at the altar of the new cathedral. From it, Jesus sits enthroned, facing the ruins of a fallen world. There, in front of him, are the seats where people gather. Behind the people from those ruins rises a wall of glass. On it are etched images of angels and saints. Figures from the Old Testament, from the New, from the martyrs of the past and present. Jesus, enthroned in glory, looks out over a fallen world. His vision, however, is one of hope. He sees the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven. He sees the saints and the prophets, the apostles and martyrs, the ways in which his church has triumphed in the midst of suffering. And through that glass, in the midst of ruins, are the charred remains of a cross, a place where God's love was made visible to all people.

This is what the apostle sees and wants us to share with you today. Christ sees you, living in a world ruined by the fall. You live among wars and rumors of wars, domestic and foreign. At times, you are victims of suffering. At other times, however, Christ sees that you are evil to others. This world would ask us to give up, to clear away the ruins, to forget about God and suffering and sin, and go on. And many try to do that. Paul invites us to stay. To stand in the midst of all of this and to stand before God, in your sin and suffering, known and unknown. Why would Paul ask you to do this? Because Paul knows the one who rules over all. Jesus. And Paul knows that this Jesus who see all has given all of himself for you.

At the heart of it all suffering and sin is that charred cross, that moment of our redemption, when Christ offered his sinless life for our sinful flesh. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the powers of sin and hell and death itself and claimed us as his own. God is for you! In Christ! Listen to Paul. He asks:

33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn?

Earlier he said:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Now Paul lets this note echo in the space of all of creation and it forms an overwhelming symphony of grace.

From that one notes, the sound grows louder and, like the new cathedral joined to the old, the vision grows larger and more glorious. Paul sees not only heart of this love but the breadth of it all. God's love spans our entire life, as Paul writes, "for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined...and those whom he predestined, he also called, and those whom he called, he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified." Then, Paul sees not only the breadth but also the height and depth of this love. Not only has Christ died and risen for us, not only does Christ hold our entire life in his hand, but Christ also rules over all of creation in love so that Paul can sing a never-ending song. He begins by saying:

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son

and closes by saying:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul knows that we are immersed, daily, in a ruined creation, but he asks us for a moment to lift our eyes and to see this vision of Christ enthroned in glory. It is a vision that gives us hope.

And hope is a hard thing, a very hard things to live in. Think about the cathedral. After the Coventry Cathedral was bombed, it would have easy for the people to do one of two thins. They could have looked at the ruins in despair, given up and walked away. Or they could have cleaned up the rooms, erased their memory, and built a new church where no one would ever know the difference. One option lets the destruction triumph and denies any hope for the future. The other option lets the future glory triumph and denies that suffering is real in this world. What they did, was something different. They held the suffering and the glory together in a vision of hope. They didn't walk away from the church, defeated by suffering, but built a new one. Yet, they didn't clear away the ruins and build on top of them. Instead, they left them as a reminder of suffering in this world. The ruins and the church stand together as a visible reminder that in the midst of a fallen creation, God continues to rule in love and his rule gives us hope.

What happened at the Cathedral decades ago happens in our lives every day. We are confronted with suffering of our world and the sins of our flesh. Listen to the news...you can hear the suffering. You can hear the battle stories of Covid-19. You hear the stories of African Americans that struggle in our nation. Look at your heart...you can see your sin. For some, the temptation to despair, tempted to give up, to lose hope, and believe that God has not conquered. For others, the temptation is to a foolish hope. They take a passage like this one that opened our reading today and use it to dismiss real pain and anguish in suffering. Don't ever use these words "All things work together for good," when people are suffering. The words don't recognize the pain and suffering in front of them. Christian life in this world is neither of these options. It's a strange combination of glory and suffering. We are certain of the glorious future that God has in store for us, we know and trust that all things work together for good, but we also see the reality of suffering in this world and are moved to sorrow and compassion for those in the midst of it. Seeing the ruins of this world, we do not give up hope. Seeing the hope of the future, we do not deny the suffering of this world. Instead, we live in both world - in the reality of suffering and in the certainty of hope.

At the foot of the tapestry is an altar and, when you draw near to that altar you experience this reality of suffering and hope. The closer you come to the tapestry, the harder it is to see Christ,

high above you, ruling overall. What you do see, however, is what the artist placed at the very bottom - a depiction of the cross. There Christ Crucified for all people.

Now today, we gather at an altar without a tapestry, but yet we gather, and we gaze upon our Crucified King. Today we celebrated a baptism, one where little Naomi was crucified with Christ and has been raised to new life. There in baptism in a very real way we come face-to-face with the cross and suffering of Christ and the hope of the future. Let us for a moment imagine if someone from the outside was looking in. They would see a few of us gathered to celebrate a victory...but they would not see victory. They would see people. Suffering people. Dear Church, we suffer the same difficulties as others. We are not immune to cancer or Covid (it is real and serious), we are not immune to mental disorder, depression, or death. And yet we gather in victory. We gather to celebrate what Christ has done. We speak to the world; this is our hope. We gather and celebrate because we know that the victory of God has come to us in Christ Jesus. He is present here with you today! Here today, suffering and hope are brought together. He triumphed over sin, death, and the devil for you and he rules the world in love...not just sitting on an easy chair, but actively rules for you. We don't see him now; we know of that new creation that is coming and we rejoice in Jesus.

And this love of Christ continues long after our victory celebration is over. The Apostle Paul reminds us:

Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Just as the Holy Spirit intercedes, so does Christ!

Often when artists depict Christ enthroned in glory, they show him seated on a throne with one raised in blessing. That is not what you see on this tapestry. Instead, you see Jesus, sitting with both hands raised upward in prayer. This Jesus who died and rose and rules over all things intercedes for you. As you make your way home, as you enter another week, he continues to pray for you. Jesus takes your suffering, your burdens, your sins, and sorrows, and presents them in prayer to His Father. Nothing you encounter, nothing you bring, can ever separate you from God. Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are more than conquerors in Jesus who rules over these ruins in love.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.