

Dear friends,

Hopefully these notes find you well and safe. As I write these notes the sun is making a welcome reappearance after what has been an unseasonably chilly and wet week (even if the rain is much needed and certainly everywhere is starting to look much greener again).

This coming week should see a further tentative step out of lockdown and towards whatever the new normal is going to look like. Many shops will be re-opening and we are planning to welcome back Year 10 students at the High School in Hartford albeit on a very limited basis in line with government guidelines. We also have the welcome news that churches will be able to reopen for private prayer, a move that is hopefully a precursor to being able to meet again for socially distanced worship before too much longer.

Although the numbers dying as a result of covid-19 are continuing to show a welcome decline, the death-toll continues to rise relentlessly, and we should never forget that behind each statistic lies a human tragedy. What is also becoming clear is the way in which, despite the phenomenal efforts of the NHS staff, the virus is highlighting health inequalities, with the outcomes being significantly worse for economically disadvantaged and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The past week has also witnessed the continued response around the world to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. There can be no justification for such behaviour, irrespective of colour or race and we need to remember that we are all created in God's image.

This week, as we embark on the long run of 'Sundays after Trinity' that will take us through to Advent Sunday, we begin a series of readings taken from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Speaking personally, I find the Book of Romans both immensely challenging and helpful. Paul (who was trained as a lawyer), begins by setting out the case against mankind just as a lawyer for the prosecution would set out their case in a court of law. Paul makes it clear that we all, Jew and Gentile alike stand condemned in God's sight but then we come to the great good news in chapter 3 and verse 21 *"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus"*

To a devout Jew, righteousness could only be found by meticulous observance of the Law (something which, as sinful humans, we can never achieve). The great good news of the gospel is that Jesus changed all of this through his death on the cross because as he died, Jesus bore the punishment for our sins so that we can be freed from their consequences – good news indeed even if it came at a dreadful price (the death of God's own Son).

In our reading for this week (Romans 5:1-8) which I really encourage you to sit somewhere quiet and read (and if you have time, do please read Romans through from the beginning), Paul speaks of the peace that we now have with God through Jesus. This peace comes, Paul writes, because we 'have been justified by faith'. Justification means to be pronounced or treated as righteous (meaning to be right with God). When we are justified, God removes the guilt and penalty of sin and declares us to be righteous in his sight. This isn't something that we can achieve by our own efforts (by slavish obedience to a set of laws for example or fulfilling some quota of good deeds to try and offset our

wrong doing), rather it is ONLY possible through faith in Jesus' death on the cross. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the truth that as Jesus died, he bore the punishment due to each of us for our sins. Because God is just, we cannot be punished twice for our sins and because Jesus has already taken the punishment for our sins, we are able to go free.

Paul continues *"we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us"*.

These words are particularly appropriate at this time of great suffering for many. We are able to boast – not in material things like the size of our house or car but in the hope of the glory of God – for that is promised to all who believe (and if you want some tiny inkling of the glory that awaits the Christian, try reading chapters 21 & 22 of the Book of Revelation!). It isn't all going to be plain sailing however for we have to expect to experience pain and suffering in this life and this is the lot for many Christians around the world (even before Covid-19). However, for the Christian, suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character, hope. We are a people who have a hope, something which seems to be very lacking at the present time. The Christian hope is founded on God and his love for us because, as Paul continues *"just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"*

Through these difficult times, we have a hope, a hope that is founded on God's love for us and demonstrated to us in the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The prayer for today

O God, the strength of all those who put their trust in you, mercifully accept our prayers and, because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without you, grant us the help of your grace, that in the keeping of your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Please continue to pray for the church, for its mission and ministry, that we would be a beacon of hope in a dark and troubled world. Help us to show the love and kindness first shown to us to those in need around us. Please do continue to pray for Veronica and the family at this time and bless her as she uses this time to study and pray. We continue to pray for all those who have been affected by Covid-19, those who have lost loved ones, those who are recovering from illness, for families that have been torn apart by the virus as well as for those in the NHS and other key workers who are often putting themselves at risk in order to help others. Please pray for those who have been impacted economically by the loss of livelihoods and who are struggling to make ends meet as well as for wisdom for those who are charged with restoring the economic well-being of this and the other nations of the world. As we continue to witness the widescale protests against racial injustice, please pray to for racial peace and justice and that we would all remember that we are made in God's image.

Jeremy Hunns