

Our Peace with God

We all long for peace, don't we? We want to live in a peaceful world – where there is an absence of war and strife. We want to enjoy peaceful relationships – with family and friends. We want to be at peace with ourselves – accepting and loving who we are inside.

Peace is something we are pursuing through our whole lives - and the pursuit of peace informs so many of the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis. But the truth is that some of us here today may feel a long way from having attained peace in our lives. Instead, our lives may seem chaotic, messy, and anything but peaceful. So, what on earth are we to make of Paul's opening comment in this passage we heard read from his letter to the Romans, verse 1? "Having been justified from faith we have peace before God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul is quite definite about it, isn't he, "We have peace with God".

But what about when we don't feel very peaceful. Are we failing in the Christian faith? What about when we don't have peace in our relationships with others? Does that mean that we aren't really living out the Christian faith? I don't think that is what Paul is saying at all, because he is talking about another type of 'peace' here.

By using the word 'peace', Paul is talking about an absence of war. He is saying that, at one time, we were at war with God, enemies of God. But now, through the work of Christ on the cross, we are friends with God, no longer at war with him, but at peace with him.

Now that is important, particularly in an age where we so often portray Christian 'peace' as being something to do with how we feel: a subjective peace; we are content, we are happy, we are feeling emotionally stable. And the problem is, of course, that as soon as we lose that sense of peace, we think we have lost our faith, and we go into spiritual crisis!

Now this is important for all of us. Being a Christian is not dependent on how you feel. Jesus isn't there to make us feel good! The Christian faith is not built on our emotions or how we feel. Instead, it is built on the historical truth of what Jesus has achieved for us on the cross.

And so, if you don't feel good and peaceful, it doesn't mean that you are not a Christian. If your relationships are not peaceful, it doesn't mean that you are a failure as a Christian. According to Paul, 'peace' is an objective description of our relationship to God and has nothing to do with our feelings.

We are at peace with God – it's an objective statement about our standing with God. 'Peace' is a simple fact; it's not a description of how we feel: "We have peace with God".

But it is not only 'peace' that Jesus's death on the cross brings us, as Paul says in verse 2: "Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."

The idea here is like that of an ordinary citizen being granted access into the royal court of a king or queen. Through Jesus' death on the cross, we have been brought into a state of peace with God and have been granted access to him; his grace, love and compassion.

None of that is dependent on how we feel. None of that is dependent on how well we think that we live out the Christian life. None of that is dependent on us at all: it is all dependent on Jesus' sacrifice for us.

And because it is all dependent on Jesus, and not how we feel or behave, we can be confident in our relationship with God. You and I can do nothing well enough to earn God's love but neither can we fall so far short of his standards that we lose God's love. Whether you feel at peace with yourself or not is not the point: however, you feel, whatever your life circumstances, you are at peace with God and you have access to his grace, and nothing can ever get in the way of that.

That is the most amazing truth you or I will ever hear, and it is this amazing truth that we need to build our faith on. It is this amazing truth that we need to build our sense of self and self-identity on. You are beautiful, you are worthy, you are beloved: not because of anything you have done or because of how you feel but because of what Jesus has achieved for you.

That is the truth – the Christian faith – in which we stand.

And that being the case, now Paul can say in the rest of verse 2: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." We don't boast about ourselves, we boast about the God who is our strength and our salvation.

But there is more to our boasting than that, as Paul goes on to show in verses 3 and 4, which are slightly curious... "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Now, at first sight, this seems weird, doesn't it? Should we be rejoicing in all our trials and tribulations as a gift from God? I don't think that is what Paul is saying here. I don't think Paul is saying that we should actively rejoice in our sufferings and celebrate them.

I think he is drawing more on the historical Jewish mindset that always remained positive amid sufferings and tribulations. When they were slaves in Egypt, they remained positive in God's provision. When they were wandering in the wilderness, they remained positive in God's provision. When they were in Babylonian exile, they remained positive in God's provision.

I think Paul is tapping into that mindset, which accepts the provision and faithfulness of God, despite outward appearances and evidence to the contrary.

The truth is that all of us go through extraordinarily tough times in life: bereavement, divorce, the breakdown of relationships, financial problems, sickness, the failure of dreams and ambitions. Life can be terribly, terribly cruel for us all. But, as Paul says here, amid our troubles and afflictions, we can remain hopeful about God.

God doesn't magically make our pain and suffering in life disappear. But he is a God who walks with us through our pain and never leaves us abandoned in the darkness of life's trials. Despite what we might suffer in life, we remain positive about God because he is always there for us and so can boast in his provision for us and we do not lose hope.

Hope is the hallmark of the Christian faith, no matter what life throws at us. The reason for our deep confidence in God is because his love has been poured out into our hearts.

And, as we know, love isn't about logic: we can't choose who we are attracted to, we can't choose the moment that love strikes, we find it almost impossible to let our head rule our heart. Love is intensely realistic and the fact that Paul writes that "the love of God has been poured into our hearts" indicates for us that the love of God is something to be experienced, not something to just be acknowledged in our heads.

The experience of the Holy Spirit is the experience of God's love, and the experience of God's love is the experience of the Holy Spirit. And, in Paul's writings the experience of the Holy Spirit results in the experience of joy, of miracles, of charismatic gifts and moral transformation. Again, none of that is ours by right – it is a gift from God.

Paul is driving the point that God's love is not just for those who are trying their best to live holy and obedient lives. God's love is for sinners – Christ died for sinners. God's love is for you and me – Christ died for you and me.

The death of Christ upon the Cross is the perfect demonstration of God's love. Do you want to know how much God loves you? Look to the Cross. Do you want to demonstrate God's love to others? Tell them about the Cross. Do you want to have confidence in God's love for you in the future? Meditate on the Cross. The Cross is the perfect demonstration – it is all we need.

So, Paul is now able to bring this part of his argument to a conclusion, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"

Now, I don't want to get too technical about this verse, but there is something quite extraordinary about the way Paul phrases this sentence because he pulls together all of time and space into one sentence, one idea: Past, Present and Future.

"Having been justified" – a Past action.

"Now" – indicates a present reality.

"We shall be saved" – the future.

In the cross of Christ, all of time and space becomes one moment of eternal significance: Past, Present and Future all become one. And that is why our salvation can never be dependent on what we do, who we are - because we are constantly changing, aren't we?

Sometimes we get it right with God, sometimes we get it wrong with God. Sometimes our faith is strong, sometimes it is weak. Sometimes we are faithful to God, other times we are unfaithful. But our salvation is not dependent on us – the times we get it right or wrong: our salvation is dependent on this moment of eternal significance, the death of Jesus on the cross in which all time and space, past, present and future become one moment. And, in that moment, that precious, holy moment, we are put right with God - and nothing you or I ever do can destroy that moment of eternal significance. And so, as Paul says here, we are saved through Christ from God's wrath.

And now we come to the pinnacle of Paul's argument in our final two verses.

First, verse 10, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

We are described here as having been God's enemies. But now, through the cross of Christ, we have been reconciled to God. But the crucial point to note

here is that the reconciliation was God's initiative and importantly, God's own activity: it comes through the death of his Son – not anything we have done.

And so finally, verse 11, "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

We boast in God, we boast through Christ because his mediation has brought us reconciliation and life. We have nothing to boast about for ourselves, but we have everything to boast about through Christ.

And this is surely the mission imperative for us at St. Andrew's: to boast about God to whoever we can, to boast about his grace, his love, his reconciliation, his grace.

It is a great God whom we worship; let's boast about him until the day we die.

Amen