Focus scripture

Romans 8:18–27

I have a book on my shelf with the title ‘all in the end is harvest’: an anthology for those who grieve. The title comes from a line of a poem by Edith Sitwell, called Eurydice’:

*Love is not changed by death,*

*And nothing is lost and all in the end is harvest*.

The complier of the anthology chose the title in the belief that in one sense, of course, almost everything is lost when someone close to you dies – close love or affection, companionship, security and many other precious needs. And yet if ‘nothing is lost’ is taken to mean that no experience ultimately goes to waste if you make use of it, it is a profound truth, and it is one message that this book tries to suggest. The sorrow, the anger, and the guilt can often in time be turned to good account.

It is within this strong faith – the faith that God shapes us towards our life in Christ – that Paul makes the claim we find in Romans 8 vs. 28.

Different translations of the text come from using different Greek manuscripts. One set of manuscripts could be translated this way: *‘We know that all things work for good for those who love God.’*

Other ancient manuscripts have a slightly different reading which our pew Bible (REB) gives *‘and in everything, as we know, he co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.’*

The first version seems to say that for Christians everything that happens to us is always for the best. The alternative version suggests that in everything God works towards the best in partnership with those who love God.

I have found the latter version to be a more comforting reading of the text when I have grieved or shared with others in their grief or pain. It would seem to say that Christians do not need to say that every tragedy or loss is part of God’s plan. We can say that in every tragedy or loss God is still God and still moves our lives and all of history towards what is good.

William Sloane Coffin is one of the most prominent preachers in the American Church.. A Presbyterian Minister and former chaplain of Yale University, he lost his son in an accident. At the funeral, the minister conducting the ceremony made some feeble statement about the accident and the boy’s death being God’s will. Before he could finish, William Sloane Coffin stood up and yelled at the preacher ‘the hell it was! It wasn’t God’s will at all. When my son died, God was the first one who cried!’

Like William Sloane Coffin, Martin Luther, the great Reformer, also lost a son. His wife Katie, shouted at him, ‘Where was God when our son died?’

Martin Luther answered, ‘the same place He was when His own Son died. He was watching and weeping!’

Even when contemplating the enormous tragedies of human history, natural disaster or human viciousness, faith reminds us that God is still at work in the midst of evil working toward the good. The question ‘why did God let this happen? Is a question you will get with the first interpretation of this verse ‘that all things work for good’. It is question that is unanswerable.

With the alternative translation: ‘in everything he co-operates for good with those who love God’ the question we begin with is ‘what can God do with this evil to help bring about the good? How can we be God’s partners, God’s servant in that work?

Both readings show that what Paul believes is not that everything turns out all right every minute, but that God has destined good for faithful people and for the whole creation. And in our pew version of the Bible God works with us toward that good.

When life has dealt us some blows and we are reeling under the pain it can be incredibly difficult to come to terms with it and move on. For some people they never seem to achieve it. They carry with them that pain and those questions – why me, why did this happen, who’s to blame. Feelings of bitterness, anger, pain and hurt. Emotional and spiritual pain is often far harder to cope with than physical pain. And it’s therefore in the area of the emotions, your soul and spirit were the surgery and healing and transformation is needed. Which is why Paul starts this passage talking about God’s Spirit’s work in our inner most being, amidst the inarticulate groans. Through prayer, worship, meditation, contemplation, comes that gentle prodding from God to open the soul to the invitation from God to move on – to consider how we can co-operate with him to help bring good out of all this.

In our main scripture passage today Paul is writing a personal message to the community of Jesus’ followers in Rome, knowing that life may seem hope­less to these people of Jesus’ way living under the rule of imperial Rome. This sense of being in a wilderness is com­pounded by dissension within the Christian community. Paul will deal with it all when he gets to Rome (1:10–13); in the meantime, this is his letter of encouragement.

Paul writes as a faithful Jew, shaped by traditional Hebrew narratives such as the expulsion of the human ones from the Garden of Eden. The third chapter of Genesis tells of the curse on the land resulting in human suffering, including a woman’s pain in childbirth and a man’s toil on the land. Paul links the future of humankind with the future of creation itself: the suffering of the oppressed community is like the suffering of creation. It follows for Paul that all creation waits for release from this imposed bondage, just as much as humankind longs for it.

What does prayer sound like in such a time? Two of Paul’s words are key: groaning and sighing. Paul hears the groaning of his community and of creation, as do we. And Paul lives buoyed in hope by his conviction that the will of God, through Spirit, is at work in all of creation “with sighs too deep for words” (v. 26).

Paul in this passage describes a creation in decay, that groans and waits for release. Yet he is also hopeful that one day it will find that release. Are we hopeful too despite appearances?

There was a film released this summer that confused and divided critics. It was called The Tree of Life – it was directed by Terrence Malik. It won the Palme D’Or award at the Cannes film festival but critics have derided as incoherent, self indulgent grandiose , and worst of all ‘Christian’. Others have described it as an inspirational, deeply personal meditation on life and the universe. It’s out on DVD next month.

The film tells the story of the O’Brien family who are raising their three sons in 1950s Texas. The story is told impressionistically, with little dialogue or exposition and seems to be the memories of Jack, the oldest boy, recalled during a mid life crisis. One of Jack’s younger brothers dies when he is quite young. When the tragic telegram arrives announcing the death, the Director Terrence Malik cuts to a long sequence depicting the birth of the universe, the formation of the stars, the shaping of the planets and the emergence of life on earth and this troubled many critics. The disparity of scale seems to have shocked them. But Malik is interested in exploring the depth of the ordinary and its connection with the over arching, even the transcendent. His films are about people you and me, and they are about scale. The sequence in the film asks questions of our place in the universe and what is the meaning and value of our life.

Awareness of our small place in the universe can be uncomfortable. There was a Professor of Astronomy who told his students ‘from the pint of view of astronomy we are utterly insignificant’ only for a student to reply, ‘no, from the point of view of astronomy, we are the astronomer’. Malik asks ‘how can we live in this universe?’ the answer he suggests is that we make meaning in our lives, as Mrs O’Brien does. She is in love with God, and with God’s creation. She delights in the glory of light and the playfulness of water; she plays with three boys with uninhibited pleasure and freedom. She believes that the point of our God given life is love.

The film addresses the Christian problem of suffering. The death of Jack’s brother weighs down on him, and contributes to his mid life crisis, which is also a crisis of faith. Was his mother, whom he loved, right to believe in Grace – selfless and yielding – or was his father, who he feared, right to believe in Nature – selfish and power seeking? Can he believe in the gracious nature of a God who created a universe in which suffering and death are inevitable, and our struggles against them are ultimately futile? Or should he embrace his father’s determination to be strong, to survive even if it means looking after number one at whatever cost?

The film has a cosmic vision, addressing the heights and deaths of human experience. One reviewer described it as the most adult film he had ever seen.

Creation offers ambiguous messages about how to live life. On the one hand there is competition, predators and prey, survival of the fittest. On the other there is co-operation, community, selfless giving and sacrifice. What vision sustains us and leads us to make meaning in life?

Science can only go so far. It doesn’t give you the answers to the big questions. Jonathon Sacks the chief Rabbi has recently written a book entitled ‘The Great Partnership: God, science and the search for meaning’. The key idea running through the book is that science takes things apart to see how they work, religion puts things together to see what they mean. These parallel objectives are both necessary to human flourishing. The book explores what we lose if we jettison the religious side of ourselves and our culture. If we lose faith, Sachs writes, we lose the dignity and sanctity of life, the politics of covenant and hope, the morality personal responsibility, marriage as a second bond and the meaningfulness of life.

Sachs suggest without religion society will be left in a wilderness, without real meaning and hope.

Jesus gave us the vision ofthe kingdom of God – how society would be if God and God’s ways were central to our living. Tonight I will speak on the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20.1-16. Where workers are hired at the start of the day and only get paid the same as workers who are hired at the end of the day. At face value it seems to suggest that everyone gets equal pay for unequal work – which in our society seems unfair. In Jesus time hired labourers were the poorest of the poor having been displaced from the land by thre wealthy and had no land to farm for their families. They were dependednt on being hired otherwise they would have no money and therefore they and their families wioudl starve. It was a desperate situation. Jesus gives a vision fo a caring society in this parable , which was made into a play to bring it to life a while ago.

A play by Timothy Thompson based on this parable in which he depicts two brothers vying for work. John is strong and capable; Philip is just as willing but has lost a hand in an accident. When the landowner comes, John is taken in the first wave of workers, and as he labors in the field he looks up the lane for some sign of Philip. Other workers are brought to the field, but Philip is not among them. John is grateful to have the work, but feels empty knowing that Philip is just as needful as he. Finally, the last group of workers arrive, and Philip is among them. John is relieved to know that Philip will get to work at least one hour. But, as the drama unfolds, and those who came last get paid a full days’ wages, John rejoices, knowing that Philip – his brother – will have the money necessary to feed his family. When it comes his turn to stand before the landowner and receive his pay, instead of complaining as the others, John throws out his hand and says with tears in his eyes, “Thank you, my lord, for what you’ve done for us today!”  
  
God’s justice arises out of a sense of community in which we see the “eleventh hour” workers as our brothers and sisters whose needs are every bit as important as our own.

When you read the parables and teachings of Jjesus you get a vision of the kingdom of God. It is a Big Picture – a Big Vision to work towards. There is a struggle in our world of decay. On the one hand there is compettion, self seeking, survuival at al coists. On the other grace, selflessness, co-opewration, community. What vision sustains us?

In the struggles of our lives, tradegy, set backs, how we treat difficult people, politics (should our new hospital be takekn out of NHS control and given to a social enterprise? Should theh DTU close? Should we set up a food bank?) issues are never clear cut – you have to work it out as best you can – but as Christians you need a big vision in mind – an overarching projector to work within.

Paul is optimistic. Remarkable considering his life where he has been beaten up, stoned, thrown in prison, suffered bad health and persecution and ultimately would die a martyr’s death. Yet he can still remain hopeful. Why? Because he has encountered Christ. He knows the power of God to raise up a dead man. The power of God to overturn sin, death and darkness. He knows the grace of God in his own life. He puts his trust in God for the future. Though he maybe groaning now he has hope for what may come. Why hope for what you have already seen? He argues. We hope for something we do not see, then we look forward to it eagerly and with patience.

Rescue, redemption, hope is writ large in the Christian story. In his book The Creators, former Librarian of the US Congress, Daniel Boorstein contrasted this Jewish-Christian view with other ways of looking at the world. Buddhists have little interest in beginnings or ends and strive instead to escape the problems of the world. Hindus and Muslims submit to it with a certain degree of fatalism. Science and art, suggests Boorstein, flourished in Jewish and Christian soil because of our instinct to struggle against this deformed world, stemming from our belief that we have a role to play in its redemption. Time matters, history matters, individuals matter. We are moving somewhere: toward redemption History is, in lurches and detours moving to a resolution Every spark of beauty, worth and meaning that we experience in this strange existence glimmers as a relic of a good world that still bears marks of its original design. Every twinge of pain, anxiety, cruelty and injustice is a relic of the fall away from that design. And every demonstration of love, justice, peace, and compassion is a movement toward its ultimate redemption, the day when, in Paul’s words the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

As part of Christ’s family, children of God, we are called to share in his life – which was also a life of suffering. Let us groan and wait, let us remain eager yet patient for glory is coming.

Open Door Harvest Service

Matthew 20:1-16-

The two boys Jeff and Billy squabbling over the size of the slices of pie their mom has placed before them. “They aren’t the same,” Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening-up the slices. Still Jeff is upset. “They still aren’t the same!” he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely proves that both slices of pie are the exact same size. “But Mom,” Jeff complains, “I want mine to be just like Billy’s . . . only bigger!”

We all tend to think we deserve a bigger slice of the pie. From the time we are little children, we are taught that doing more is worth more.

Did you get an allowance as a child, that weekly “reward” for doing the chores that were your responsibility? If so, you probably had your allowance and the amount of work you did to “earn” that allowance go up as your age did. Right?

If a five year old gets a dollar for picking up their toys and clothes;

If an eight year old gets five dollars for feeding the dog, emptying the garbage, and vacuuming the living room;

Then a twelve year old should get considerably more for mowing the lawn, doing some laundry, watching younger siblings, and cleaning the garage.

Chores and allowances teach children that in this world’s economy we have to do work in order to receive our “rewards.” We want our kids to learn and to live the adage, “Hard work pays off.”

That is why the parable in today’s gospel text is so unsettling. It is easy to identify with the grumbling guys who worked sunup to sundown, through the heat of the day, and then watched in amazement as some slackers who worked for one measly hour, in the cool of the approaching evening no less, got paid a full day’s wage. Of course the full day worker EXPECTS more. Of course the full day worker SHOULD get more. It is only fair. More work should equal more wages. ”Hard work pays off.”

But it doesn’t. Not in Jesus’ story of the kingdom…

It seems that even monkeys, if they could read, would get indignant with this parable. In the Austrailian newspaper "The Melbourne Age," there was an intriguing report from the University of Atlanta called: "Monkeys want to see justice done."

At the University of Atlanta, researchers have been testing capuchin monkeys. They gave them the task of picking up a small granite stone and bringing it to the researcher within one minute. If they were successful, they were rewarded with the wage of a slice of cucumber. The scheme worked well. It was happy lab situation as long as each monkey received the same wage. This turned sour when the researchers varied the pattern. They tried giving one monkey a grape for its reward. Indignation broke out. First the others withheld their labor, and later they even took to throwing away the cucumber and the granite stone.

It had offended their sense of justice. That's almost human isn't it? We are happy with our lot until we see someone in a similar situation who is better off. Then we cry foul! We want to go on strike and demand an end to such monkey business.

Generosity Is the Secret to Our Joy

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married, stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a wonderful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.

At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn." And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity.

The old rabbi said that there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life is not fair, thank God! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.  
 

We Need Great Trust in God

Johnny Carson tells a story about the time when, as the host of the Tonight Show, he made a joke about there being a toilet paper shortage in the city.   
  
The next day there really was a shortage because all the viewers who had watched his show ran out afterward and bought up extra toilet paper just in case. There was no trust in the fact that people, if they chose to work together, could ration out the toilet paper to make sure there would be enough for everyone. People panicked and grabbed not what they needed, but more than they needed, leaving others with nothing at all. When people allow their lives to be directed by this kind of fear and self-love, then they find out when they die and finally have the opportunity to enter into a heavenly community, that it is not really what they want at all.   
  
They shrink back. You see, you need to have a great deal of trust in God and the goodness of others in order to buy into the concept of heaven, and these people don't. They can't anymore, because they have learned here on earth that you take what you can get when you can get it, because if you don't, no one else is going to look out for you. Heaven to these people is a very unsettling place.   
  
Our landowner is like the kingdom of heaven because he seeks to include everyone, he gives freely to everyone so that they each have as much as they need, and he holds up a mirror to the deepest part of our being that asks the question, "are we okay with that?"

The Rules of a Family

The parable of the vineyard workers (Matt. 20) offends our sense of fairness. Why should everyone get equal pay for unequal work? Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate-dipped cone money could buy. A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it.

A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. In fact, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day--both of them). God wants all his children to enjoy the complete fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way.

Postscript:

A preacher preached on this text, a church member came to him after the service and said, "You know, preacher, there are parts of the Bible that are difficult to abide, and other parts that aren’t. The story you preached on today is one that I find totally offensive! It’s just not fair to pay everyone the same wage when some have worked hard and some have hardly worked. Jesus was just wrong about that. I think you should have preached on something less offensive." The following Sunday, he preached about the prodigal son.