

Sunday 18th June 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 32 “Meet and right it is to sing”
 503 “Love divine, all loves excelling”
 372 “Come down, O Love divine”
 465 “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

READINGS: Romans 5:18
 Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

“SUFFERING, ENDURANCE, CHARACTER, HOPE”

“Suffering, endurance character, hope” – these words from Paul’s letter to the Romans spoke to me when I was preparing a service on Susanna Wesley two Thursdays ago. I chose this same reading that day unaware that it was the set reading for today.

Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles, did not have an easy life – a lesser person may well have lost hope, or even lost faith. Susanna married at the age of 19 years – she had 19 children, of whom only 10 survived into adulthood. Yes, there was a high infant mortality rate in the 18th century but living in a rural, marshy part of Lincolnshire, she had little help and few resources for her family. There was a fire in the house in which she lived – the Epworth Rectory and she lost pretty much everything in that fire. She nearly lost little John. The children had to be farmed out to friends in the neighbourhood until a new house could be built.

Throughout all these difficulties Susanna was pretty much managing on her own. Her husband was not practical at all. He was always in debt. He was even sent to prison for debt at one time. Yes, husband Samuel was not a great helpmeet for Susanna. He was more interested in writing books and being in London so that he should be noticed. Susanna had to struggle on her own most of her life, living from hand to mouth.

It would have been only too easy for Susanna to have caved in – to have allowed suffering to lead to frustration, frustration to self-pity and apathy and then to a feeling of hopelessness. It would have been only too easy for Susanna to lose hope and become fatalistic and negative.

But this was not the case – like Paul, Susanna had a depth of faith that gave her inner peace and assurance. Yes, she suffered but her sufferings certainly build character which gave her an abiding hope.

Let us get this right. Paul is not saying we should seek suffering – suffering is an inevitable part of human life whether we like to or not. Paul is speaking of celebration

and hope even in the midst of sufferings. God can use our sufferings to transform us into stronger, more resilient, more compassionate people.

Recently the Queen on her official birthday spoke of the suffering that we as a nation have undergone recently – she spoke of a sombre mood in the nation.

So this reading from Romans has a far more contemporary resonance with our suffering – the terrorist attacks, the wanton violence and this week the horrific fire at Grenfell Tower in West London.

Yesterday I was at Muslim Welfare House in Finsbury Park. We were holding a Great Get Together in honour of Jo Cox who was killed by a man with right-wing sympathies just a year ago. Jo Cox was a young and idealistic MP. She reached out to all the diverse communities in her Batley Constituency in Yorkshire. Thomas Mair did not like this – he shot and stabbed her.

Jo Cox had a husband and two young children. How easy it would have been for Brendan Cox to withdraw into his grief, to focus all his energy on being a parent to his children – but, on the contrary, his suffering gave rise to positive, outward-focussed initiatives. He set up the Jo Cox Foundation through which money is raised and used to help a number of causes – addressing loneliness in communities here in Britain and help for suffering people in Syria. But yesterday (and in some places today) groups of people inspired by Jo Cox and her Foundation were getting together with neighbours in all sorts of ways and in all sorts of places and across differences of faith, ethnicity, age, interest and education. That was what was happening at Muslim Welfare House – strangers talking to one another, people breaking down stereotypical views they may have held of other types of people. In that courtyard out in the sun we saw strangers becoming friends, groups of people moving from suffering to hope.

Yesterday evening I went to Notting Hill Methodist Church – it stands in the shadow of that blackened tower block, whose silhouette is now recognisable to us all. As I walked north from Holland Park Road there was the smell of evening jasmine coupled with the rancid odour of smouldering wood, metal and plastic – a reminder, if one was needed, of the inter-mingling of joy and sorrow, the sweet and the sour in all our lives. For the people of Grenfell Tower the suffering is still raw. There was much anger visible on the faces of people there and in the messages on the walls. We can hardly imagine the suffering of those who not only lost loved ones but had to watch helplessly as they were consumed by the flames.

Yet, in the midst of this suffering what is most noticeable is the response of the local people – old and young, Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Jew, African, Asian, Caribbean and white. All have sought to bring help to the suffering and in doing so have found new depths of resilience, cooperation and even hope – hope that things can change for the better.

The words of the Apostle Paul in his message to the Romans are difficult for us. After speaking of the peace we have with God through his grace to us through Jesus Christ, he says 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.'

The word 'boast' sits uneasily with most of us – as children we are taught not to boast. However, in this passage, this is a misleading translation – the original Greek would better be rendered 'rejoice.' Paul was speaking as one sufferer to a suffering community of Christians in Rome. Paul had been buffeted by the words and actions of many – both Christian and non-Christian. He had been thrown into prison. He knew what suffering was – so he was speaking to the fledgling community of Christians in Rome from a position of empathy. His own suffering had built his endurance and his endurance as his faith in Christ had been strengthened and deepened.

So to Rome's Christians, suffering under the rule of the Roman Empire and its pressure to worship the Emperor and the Emperor alone, Paul spoke a word of encouragement and hope.

Paul was always acutely aware that any suffering we undergo is an experience we share with Jesus Christ. Paul says to the Romans, 'while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for us God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.'

In the midst of suffering and tragedy – personal and communal, people often ask, 'how could God allow this terrible thing to happen?'

Suffering is part of our human existence – the Biblical record chronicles the suffering of God's people over the ages – yet God is a distant deity or a dispassionate bystander. God suffers with us as he suffered with his son, Jesus Christ. Where there is suffering, there is God, where there is suffering, there is God with his people –strengthening, inspiring and upholding them. In the words of Paul, 'we are able to get through tough times because God's love has been poured into our hearts – it is this love that enables us to endure, build character and live in hope.' As we endure we develop greater reserves of moral and ethical qualities – our character is formed.

'Character' in Greek is related to the notion of the refiner's fire, 'character' is that which like a metal that has been purified, has been refined, strengthened and purified through suffering overcome. I think we all know of people where we see this truth – people, like the Susanna Wesley's of this world, have a depth of peace, compassion and love because of what they have come through.

There is something else we should also note – Susanna Wesley was able to love and hope because she was together with her children and the Christian community in Epworth. She was not alone.

Gathering together – to sing, to pray, to stand alongside one another is the hallmark of Christian endurance. Love has to be at the heart of things and it is difficult, if not impossible to love alone. Thus those deeply affected by the fire at Grenfell Tower have come together, have prayed together and have acted together.

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. We rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we also rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produced hope and hope does not disappoint us.”

May God bless us and grant us the grace to be people of hope in our suffering world.
Amen.