WORKING TOGETHER WITH GOD

My first time back in the Minster church building was last Sunday, and one thing I noticed about our worship was how strongly and confidently we said the liturgical responses together. I found it quite inspiring, and I really think this is one way we can encourage each other. As St. Paul said to his disciple Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity.”

I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait to be singing in church again. I love congregational hymns. I love that solidarity of corporate faith that they express. You may have noticed I quite often finish my sermons by quoting from a hymn, and today will be no exception. My hope is that, once we’re allowed to sing together again, we’ll discover the same strength and confidence as we have with the spoken liturgy.

We read this morning from what is probably my favourite chapter in the whole Bible, St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Chapter Eight. I’m currently reading a book about this letter by Bishop John A. T. Robinson, called Wrestling with Romans. And certainly you do have to wrestle with it. But I love how Paul deals with the big ideas. He’s not afraid to tackle the difficult questions.

Many years ago I studied for a Music degree, and my Composition teacher used to talk a lot about whales. He said a good way to compose an effective piece of music is to think of the profile of a whale’s back. If you think about it, it gradually rises from the tail to a high point about three-quarters of the way along. Then it falls away quite rapidly towards the nose. So he suggested crafting the emotional shape of a musical composition using this whale shape, rising slowly to a climax and then falling away at the end.

Paul does something quite similar with his Letter to the Romans. He spends the first seven chapters working his way through a problem: the problem being our spectacular failure to live up to our human potential; and the effect that this failure has on our relationship to the divine source of our life. It’s an uphill journey, as Paul explains in detail all that Jesus Christ did for us: how through the perfect life and death of Jesus we can be accepted by God and brought into a new relationship of peace; how we no longer have to fear the consequences of our failure, and how we can be liberated from the inevitability of death.

But there’s still a problem: all this changes our relationship with God, but it doesn’t seem to change us. We want to do the right thing, but our self-centred nature just keeps on rearing its ugly head. So in Chapter Eight, Paul reaches the climactic point in his argument by introducing a new character into the drama: the Holy Spirit. This is what makes the difference, what gets us over the whale’s humpback, so to speak.

This is the high point of Paul’s message: God doesn’t just forgive us, and then leave us to our own devices. If we’re willing—and I really mean any of us, whether we’ve heard of Christ or call ourselves Christians or not—if we’re willing, God will start to lift us to a new way of living; not living
to serve ourselves all the time, but beginning to take a broader perspective on life, to consider the
good of others as well as ourselves. St. Paul’s message is that we are more than just flesh and
blood. To quote an old song by the band The Police, “We are spirits in the material world.” And in
Romans, Chapter Eight, Paul explains how this Holy Spirit works.

At the start of our reading this morning, Paul explains what it means to pray in the Spirit. We
heard about this last Sunday, but I think it’s so important that it’s worth repeating.

Our starting point when it comes to prayer is one of weakness. Which is fine, because prayer is
not all about us; it’s about God. I should say there’s nothing actually wrong with eloquent prayer.
When people lead our intercessions in church with thoughtfulness and empathy, I think we all find
it inspiring. But in our private prayer we don’t need to be articulate. Paul says that even the Holy
Spirit prays “with sighs too deep for words.”

It really is the thought that counts: our desire to align ourselves with God’s desires; our
willingness to see the world through his eyes, to feel his love and his pain. And the Spirit of God will
do the rest. He will take our frustrated cries and conflicted emotions and turn them into action.
Maybe in response, God will change someone’s life on the other side of the world. Or he may
empower us to become the answer to our own prayers. But in this way God wants to involve us in
his work of filling humanity with his Christly character.

So we come to what is perhaps my favourite verse in the whole Bible: “We know that in all things
the Spirit works together with those who love God, to bring about what is good.” In other words,
this is Paul’s grand summing up of what he’s just been saying about prayer. It’s not just us by our
little selves. Neither is it God doing all the work, with us being irrelevant. The great divine purpose
is that we should co-operate with God, to join together in a divine-human partnership to bring
about good in the world. I find that incredibly uplifting and humbling at the same time.

In the next verse Paul talks about predestination, which can be a difficult idea to get our heads
around. It’s important to recognize that Paul isn’t saying that God only wanted to predestine
certain people. What Paul means is that God, knowing beforehand that we would respond to his
love, then marked us out for the destiny of becoming like Christ.

To clarify why some people received this destiny and not others, we can look elsewhere in the
Bible. The Apostle John says, “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave
the right to become children of God.” So, far from God imposing his will on us, we actually get to
choose. If that’s the destiny God is offering, I’ll take it with both hands!

Above all, I believe Paul’s purpose in all this is to demonstrate how God loves us. Because this is
where he really gets to the emotional high point: the top of the whale’s back, so to speak.

St. Paul is never one to minimize the struggles of this life. But through it all, God is for us. Not
only did God live out his love in the life of Jesus Christ. Not only did Jesus embody the acceptance
and liberation that God offers to us. But more than all that, the Spirit of God himself comes to dwell
within us, so that we can share in that victory of love over death that Jesus won for us.
And it’s that astounding love that we celebrate in the Eucharist. During lock-down we’ve talked a lot about spiritual communion. And it’s right that we should emphasize it while we’ve been so physically separate. But now that we can be back together again, able to eat the bread, and maybe before long to drink the wine, it’s also good to remind ourselves that every Eucharist is a spiritual communion. It is a time, above all other times when, as St. Paul says earlier in this chapter, “the Spirit of God affirms to our spirit that we are God’s children.”

As we come to share communion, I invite you to make that connection with Christ: the Christ “who loved me and gave himself up for me;” the Christ of history, the Christ at work in the world, and the Christ at the depth of our being. May we know his presence and receive his love, as we respond in faith and worship.

I promised to quote you a hymn at the end, and here it is, from a communion hymn called “Amidst us our Beloved stands,” written by that great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon:

If now, with eyes defiled and dim,
We see the signs but see not him,
Oh, may his love the scales displace,
And bid us see him face to face.