

**The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011 – More than Conquerors**  
**Reading: Romans 8: 26-39**

Let me start by noting there is much to tempt the eager preacher in all of today's readings, and I need to acknowledge I did consider carrying on from last week with Jacob in Genesis – which would have taken us into an odd kind of story – and I also contemplated focusing on Matthew and some frankly disturbing parables that don't say at all what we usually think they do, but in the end, for the third time in the past month, I find myself drawn to Paul's letter to the Romans.

This is our third and final week in Romans 8, and it's not hard to see why those who select our readings chose to break this chapter into thirds. In fact, they could probably have spread it over twice as many Sundays and we still wouldn't have the time or scope to explore all the many remarkable points Paul offers in these 39 verses. We have to split them up if we are to do them justice, and especially if we are to explore what they might have to say to us today. It's just a practical reality, but ...

There are two dangers we always need to be aware of when we approach the Bible; firstly, while our lectionary breaks these chapters up into supposedly manageable pieces, that's not the way they were written. When Paul sat down to write to the Christians in Rome he didn't include verse and chapter numbers. Romans is a single, complete unit, as are, for the most part, the other books and epistles of the New Testament. So when Paul writes about things like condemnation and adoption and inheritance, and then carries on to discuss prayer and the Spirit and election and predestination, these aren't isolated points – they're all part of the same train of thought, the same point he's making, and we separate them from each other at our peril.

Secondly, we need to remember that Paul wasn't writing to us. This is true of the whole Bible of course, but in some ways it's especially significant here. Paul is writing to the first few Christians in one of the first few churches in what would eventually become a worldwide movement. At this point though there is no global Church, there are no denominations, although there are groups based around certain people, there is no Bible, and there won't be for several centuries, and there is no recognised Christian religion in the Roman Empire.

Over the past few weeks Kirsten and I have been spending more time than we should watching one of her birthday presents; the box set of the TV series 'Rome'. Rome is set in the days of Julius and Octavian Caesar and the producers prided themselves on recreating as authentically as possible the culture and practices of Rome in the years before Jesus. What we see is a society based entirely upon class and status, neither of which can be brought and earned, only born into, a culture soaked with violence and oppression, and the beginnings of a political approach that would come to be called 'Pax Romana' – the Peace of Rome – which dealt with dissent and unrest at the point of a sword or by crucifixion.

This is the context Paul writes to here. These Roman Christians would have been a small, diverse, group, but primarily made up of those from the lower classes – as was the case with most early Christian communities. They would have known without doubt or

questioning that their places in life were fixed and determined by the family they were born into, and they knew that their lot was to struggle stoically through the day to day challenges placed before them until they died. As members of a new sect in a society where it had become almost illegal to worship any God but the official ones they would have faced ridicule at best, and danger, oppression and death at worst

It is to these Roman Christians that Paul writes about being adopted as children of God and co-heirs with Christ. It is to these Roman Christians that Paul promises the Spirit who will “put to death” in them the deeds and desires of their old lives and intercede for them alongside Jesus. It is to these Roman Christians that Paul promises “all things work together for good for those who love God”, and it is to these Roman Christians that he declares, “we are more than conquerors”.

‘More than conquerors’. That phrase has been running around inside my head for days. As soon as I hear it I know that it says something profound, important to me and to us, just as it did to those Roman Christians. Over the past week I’ve read many commentaries on this reading, and for the most part I’m afraid I think they miss the point. They talk about the victory we have won in Christ, the evils that can be conquered with God, but Paul doesn’t promise we can or will be, he says we are, and he doesn’t describe us as conquerors, he says we are more than conquerors, and in Rome there was no such thing. To be a conqueror meant you had beat your enemy into submission, enslaved his women and children and killed his generals and warriors – the winner was the one left standing. But into this context Paul writes, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

‘In all these things’. Paul makes it clear that Christianity won’t save anyone from “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword” – he even quotes Psalm 44, which cries out to God in battle, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered’ – it’s likely this would have rung all too true for the Roman’s first hearing this letter. Paul never promises them safety, but he does promise that they will be more than conquerors, “through him who loved us.”

This is where we need to go beyond just the few verses we’ve heard today and grasp the central tenet of letter to the Romans as a whole; without Christ we are nothing, with Christ we are everything. To be more than conquerors is to be loved by Christ – the one who conquered death itself, and more than conquering, transformed it forever. For Paul there can be no more important or powerful force in the entire universe than the love of Jesus, and the most significant question in the whole of Romans chapter 8 is “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” and the answer, which takes precedence over all and everything else Paul writes here, is “nothing”.

*“For I am convinced* that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Some of us hear those words often. They are, for me, some of the most moving and powerful words in our Anglican funeral liturgy, and each time I say them my prayer is they bring some hope, maybe even some solace, to those who gather to farewell a loved one. But they are not words written for a funeral, nor did Paul write them to the dead – these

are words written to a people who faced potentially insurmountable odds, to whom Paul has declared that they will be more than conquerors through the love of Christ, which *he is convinced* they will never be able to be separated from.

I find myself drawn to those words, 'for I am convinced'. This is so much more than trust, or hope, or even belief. We can believe something without ever really knowing it, but to be convinced of something, that takes more than believing or even knowing. To be convinced is to be utterly certain, completely sure, and such conviction can only ever come with experience.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul makes these promises to the Christians of Rome, and two thousand years later we claim them for ourselves. Paul assures them and us that we truly are children of God and co-heirs with Christ. He promises that the Spirit will be there to intercede for us and to help us pray when the words just won't come. Paul states, with certainty and strength, that regardless of what we face; persecution, hardship, sadness, loss, unemployment, financial problems, relationship issues, global warming – no matter what, we *are* already more than conquerors through the one who loves us. And Paul assures us all that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from that love.

Paul makes all these promises, but only we can make them our own.

May God be with us in our believing, in our knowing, and in our becoming convinced that we are loved, in all, through all, despite all, always and forever. Amen.