



### *Romans 8*

I want to start with expressing my thanks and appreciation for this opportunity to be with you – to you, Your Grace, and to you, Mr Dean. The Province of Southern Africa is important not only for its large size, but also for its unique history. It is the church of Tutu and Huddleston. It is the church of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and resistance to apartheid. It is the church of victory won and lived in generosity, and without illusion as to the difficulties faced.

Yet, more than 25 years later, the issues sometimes seem to go round and round. Archbishops are warned to stay out of politics. You may as well tell a fish to stay out of water. Water is where fish swim; the *polis*, the organisation of the city, the country, the region, is where people swim – because they are people in relationship, and relationships of citizens need structures, and those structures need good values – and that means politics. Religious leaders commenting on values and politics in England are often unpopular! Party politics is what we avoid, but politics is where we live – and it is a central theme of the gospel. Politics is ultimately about the Kingdom of Heaven. Your Grace, dear brother, we stand with you.

Being opposed is not fun. It does not lift our spirits. And when, as you have in South Africa, you spent decades and decades facing an atrocious and deeply evil ideology of apartheid, even a trace of wrongdoing brings back the taste of injustice. One thinks, "Perhaps we are simply going round the circle again."

Yet we are not.

A New Year reminds us that history is not circular. It is not endless repetition, but linear: a story written by God in the colours and characters of human beings. A story that has a beginning, a middle and an end – it ends in triumph. Even if we struggle and suffer along the way, we know that because God raised Christ from the dead, we will see the victory of Jesus Christ and share in his perfect Kingdom.

In Romans 8, Paul struggles with all these questions as he writes to the church at the heart of the Roman Empire. It's a chapter that is important at the beginning of the New Year, for it reminds us that with God, there is only the time of salvation, the now, and the not yet, the time of the Kingdom.

Let me remind you where we have come from. Romans was written to a church not as a theological treatise, but as a letter. It was aimed to unite the Roman church in the truth of Jesus Christ. To oversimplify radically, and in less than 60 seconds:

- chapters 1-3 deal with the universal problem of sin;
- chapter 4 the example of Abraham;
- 5-8 the solution given by God in grace alone, of salvation through faith in Christ;
- 9-11 the faithfulness of God to Israel;
- 13-15 what do we do about it;
- 16 goodbye and see you soon.

Don't rely on that outline for exams! but it is, I trust, a fair bird's eye view, but it misses the beauty of the book. Chapter 7 of course recognises the problem of our constant dilemma between our desires and obedience to God.

So what is the answer? First, verses 1-11: walk by the Spirit. Let's be honest: he only writes it because he needs to. There are two ways in which typically the church fails to walk by the Spirit.

First, we abandon the law entirely. We neglect the issues of truth. We forget the teaching of scripture, or we reinterpret them in the way we want. Worse still, we make them a private matter and say the church should not interfere in the public affairs of the state or in the private matters of the individual. Quite what that leaves is a mystery.

To abandon the law is to turn away from God. Adultery is wrong not simply because God wants to stop you having fun with the good-looking neighbour or fellow worker; not because God hates fun; but because God is faithful. If we are to be walking in the Spirit then we must conform to the image of a faithful God.

Theft is wrong because God supplies (often through other members of the church).

Murder is wrong because God makes the decisions on life and death.

Envy is wrong because God is sufficient.

Idolatry is wrong because God is one and universal.

And so on.

Secondly, the church turns away from the Spirit when it becomes legalistic. The Spirit brings the law alive in our heart. Churches grow not when they are full of legalists, but when they are full of living and holy saints who walk in the Spirit; who celebrate the goodness of God; who live in joy and love. Legalism takes the law and makes it a burden. It turns to the person with a drug problem and tells them not of hope but of condemnation. It rejects the person with AIDS because they must have sinned. Legalism says to the LGBT+ person "you are intrinsically evil," and neglects to love.

When we do not walk by the Spirit the church is divided; for the Spirit brings us as one to Jesus, to love inexhaustible and hope that never fades. So Paul talks in verses 1-11 of the work of the Spirit as "life and peace".

He was speaking to a church that was divided between the weak and strong, between Jew and Gentile — real division to great depth, and much mutual dislike. Their views on huge subjects were very different, and his answer is, "Walk according to the Spirit, not the flesh."

It is the flesh that brings division, accentuates dislike, and leads us into behaviour that has more to do with power and prestige and our own sense of self-worth than with Christ and being Christ in a world of savagery. That world recognises us well when we walk in the flesh, and we are seen as aliens and strangers when we walk in the Spirit; but we are also seen as one — and one that opens eyes to Jesus.

Verses 12-17 emphasise the work of the Spirit of God in our spirits, the witness that we belong to God — and thus necessarily to one another. In a world where politicians say "stay out of politics", the biggest political statement we can make is to love one another in the power of the Spirit, whatever our differences. This where we begin to turn outwards. Verses 1-11 speak of what we are within ourselves. Are we preaching morality or the Spirit? Do we seem rule-bound or free to be holy? Verses 12-17 speak of our status, children of God, of our identity, heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ.

In the beginning of a year that may well be threatening in so many places, who we really are matters. To be sure of our identity — that we belong to God, that we are his heirs — will direct our response to threats, compel our obedience to Christ, liberate our service to the poor and generate our energy in witness and evangelism. In John 13, Jesus washes feet because he knows he has come from God and is returning to God. In other words, he is liberated from pride by being certain of his identity.

Verses 18-30 turn to the reality of life: suffering. Remember that at the heart of Paul's very realistic view of the world is the experience and the knowledge of suffering. I dare not speak to you of that, for you know and understand suffering, because you are African and because you are South African.

I assume that some of those in Rome would have wanted to answer Paul by saying, "If we are walking in the Spirit, why is life so tough? Does our suffering, persecution, threats, illnesses, struggle — does that not all mean that we are not walking in the Spirit? Are they not a form of judgement?" Remember, the whole way through Romans, Paul works with dialogue, answering questions put to him by an imaginary questioner. He does it again here.

His answer to the questioner, in verse 18, is direct: today's suffering is nothing compared to the glory that will come. Then he paints a picture of our prayers. The whole creation is caught up in suffering, so it's hardly surprising that it affects us. We see the suffering of the creation more and more, and more and more linked to a greedy and uncaring human exploitation of the environment. We experience the groans of creation, wounded and tortured. Its answer is not only the environmental movement, but a church proclaiming the Kingdom a Kingdom which from Genesis 1 to Ezekiel 37 to Revelation 21, is characterised by harmony, fruitfulness and healing.

Then there is a struggle over how we pray: we do not know how to pray so the Spirit intercedes for us. We are caught up in suffering sometimes we can only cry out and trust to the intercession of Jesus for us. Life with struggle and a limited view of the future is the norm. It's human life. Be reassured that your struggles and suffering are a sign of being authentic children of God and God is not overcome: he overcomes. So the climax is verses 28-30: the knowledge that God works, the confidence that he is working for our good, and the development of holiness and righteous living.

How do we recognise an authentic church? Not by its smooth journey but by its holiness, which is seen in love for God and one another. Repent of all hatred, before we repent of anything else.

Verses 31-39 come to the bedrock of this greatest of chapters. It tells the Romans that, yes, walking in the Spirit is tough. Yes, we struggle to remember our status as belonging to God. Yes, there is a cosmic level of suffering, touching the creation as well as each of us, and all of us together. But it does not depend on us hanging onto God, but on God who will not be separated from us.

Yes, the church fails but our advocate is Jesus, and he has the judge's ear and has paid our penalty. Yes, death and destruction threaten but Jesus has overcome death. Yes, there is a great battle against overwhelming odds but we are more than conquerors.

So what do we say at the beginning of a New Year of such uncertainty? We persevere, knowing the struggle but knowing that the victory is in the hands of God and that whatever else happens we cannot be separated from our common Father, because we are co-heirs with Christ. In such a hope we face threats. We love one another. We refuse hatred. We accept difference. We follow Christ as one people, with one gospel, one hope, one Spirit, one love overflowing and capturing all.

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