

²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.*

If you go to Coventry Cathedral in England and stand before the altar, you will be overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by the tapestry that rises above you. The scene is Christ enthroned in glory. A pale and wounded Christ is seated on a throne. Surrounding him is a band of gold that branches out into four corners. And in each corner is a symbol of one of the evangelists. These four evangelists give us one vision: a vision of the wounded Christ ruling over the fallen world. The sheer size of the tapestry makes it overwhelming. It is about the size of a tennis court, hanging in the air. It took 12 weavers 3 years to complete. And yet this woven picture of Christ, enthroned in glory, hanging above the altar, overwhelms in another way. It overwhelms us with God’s love.

What Graham Sutherland did with thread in this tapestry is what the apostle Paul does with words in his letter. This morning, we consider one of the most beautiful passages of Paul in Romans. A time when he has woven together all of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – with all of creation – death and life, angels and demons, present and future, things seen and unseen. All of God rules over all of creation in love. That’s what the apostle Paul wants us to know. Paul takes us to the end of the story of God, which is really not an ending at all but a new beginning, a glorious re-creation of all things and the final victorious revelation of God’s people as more than conquerors in his love.

Yet when we read the words of the apostle Paul, something interesting happens. It is not as if we are standing there, at the foot of this tapestry, looking up at an overwhelming figure. No, it is as if Paul has invited us upward so that we are with the figure of Christ in the tapestry and, from there, has asked us to turn around and see what Christ sees. Paul wants us to see the world through the eyes of Christ for he knows that that vision will change your life.

So often, when we come to church, we come with a limited vision of God. We look at God through the experience of our lives and that limits what we see. Did He answer my prayers this week? Did He give me strength to deal with work? To handle the kids? God can become

small. Small enough for us to fit Him into our lives. Once a week. On a Sunday. Whereas Paul wants to change our perspective. Paul wants us to experience a reversal. We don't fit God into our lives. No, God brings us into His life, His love, His rule of the world. Paul asks us for just a moment to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, risen from the dead and ruling in love. So, this morning, let the apostle Paul raise your eyes and your hearts to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Let Paul bring you to God, in love, ruling over ruins.

I. The Ruins of This World:

Ruling over ruins. That is what Paul helps us see this morning. God in love is ruling over ruins.

Paul's words remind us of the ruins of this world. The ruins outside the Christian and the ruins within. Paul names those things people fear would separate them from God. Tribulation, distress, and persecution. Famine and nakedness. Danger and sword. And these are not just words for the apostle Paul. No, Paul is naming the reality of what he has seen in his ministry. He himself is journeying to Jerusalem, carrying a gift for the poor who are suffering under famine. Paul has been in prison. He has suffered tribulation and danger. He knows how the world fights against God's people.

The evils, however, are not only those that stand outside the Christian. Paul knows there is evil that flows from within. He himself stood there as Stephen was stoned and he approved of his execution. So Paul knows this hatred and abuse from the inside. He himself could easily stand there, guilty before God, accused of his sin.

In this section of his letter, Paul invites us to bring it all before God – the evil that stands outside of you, the forces that threaten to destroy you, the loss of a job, the death of child, the tragedies you know you will never get over. Paul invites you to bring these before God. But he also asks you to be honest about the evil within. We stand before God, suffering from a world in ruins but also suffering from our own sins. The distance that lies between you and your son, the anger that brews between you and a co-worker, the greed that causes you to turn a blind eye to others in need. Paul asks us to bring this all before God, the evil without, the evil within, to gather it up and place it before His throne, sure that there is not enough time nor enough space to hold all of the evil and suffering we bring. Paul asks us to bring that before God because Paul knows what God in Christ is bringing to us. Love.

II. God Ruling in Love:

While we bring all of our evil before God, God brings all of his love to us. This is Paul's insight. Paul knows that God is ruling over the ruins of this world in love.

If you were to go to Coventry Cathedral and stand there, below the tapestry, looking away from it, toward the church, it is amazing what you would see. As Jesus looks from the tapestry, He sees a church in ruins. Coventry Cathedral is a church built upon ruins. On November 14, 1940, the city of Coventry was bombed. It experienced the blitzkrieg, the nighttime horror of Hitler's Luftwaffe in World War II. In one night, this cathedral, this place where people had worshipped for almost 900 years, was reduced to charred wood and ruined stones rising from the earth in columns of smoke.

Jock Forbes, a stonemason at the time, looked over the ruins and saw two medieval timbers, charred from the fire, and fallen to the ground in the shape of a cross. They took these timbers and placed them, as a cross, on top of a pile of rubble, making an altar before a wall of shattered stones. Behind them, they placed the words, "Father forgive." Then, a new cathedral

was built extending off of the old ruins. This tapestry hangs at the altar of that new cathedral. From it, Jesus sits enthroned, facing the ruins of a fallen world. There, in front of Him, are the seats where people gather. But behind the people are the ruins of the old cathedral. Separating the people from those ruins is a wall of glass. On it are etched images of angels and saints. Figures from the Old Testament, from the New Testament, from the martyrs of the past and the present. Jesus, enthroned in glory, looks out over a fallen world. His vision, however, is one of hope. He sees the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven. He sees the saints and the prophets, the apostles and martyrs, the ways in which His church has triumphed in the midst of suffering. And through that glass, in the midst of the ruins, are the charred remains of a cross, a place where God's love was made visible to all people.

This is what the apostle Paul sees and wants to share with you today. Christ sees you, living in a world ruined by the fall. You live among wars and rumors of wars. At times, you are victims of suffering. At other times, however, Christ sees that you are evil toward others. This world would ask us to give up, to clear away the ruins, to forget about God and about this suffering and sin, and go on. And many try to do that. Yet, Paul invites you to stay. To stand in the midst of all of this and to stand before God, in your sin and suffering, known and unknown. Why would Paul ask you to do this? Because Paul knows the One who rules over all. Jesus. And Paul knows that this Jesus who sees all has given all of Himself for you.

At the heart of it all suffering and sin is that charred cross, that moment of our redemption, when Jesus Christ offered His sinless life for our sinful flesh. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the powers of sin and hell and death itself and claimed us as His own. God is for you. In Christ. Listen to Paul. He asks you, "*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?*" Earlier the apostle Paul said, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (3:23-24). There is forgiveness and grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul sees not only the heart of this love but the breadth of it all. God's love spans our entire life, as Paul writes, "*For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined . . . and those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called, He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.*" Then, Paul sees not only the breadth but also the height and depth of this love. Not only has Christ died and risen for us, not only does Christ hold our entire life in His hand, but Christ also rules over all of creation in love. He begins by saying, "*all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose*" and he closes by saying, "*I am sure 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 knows that we are immersed, daily, in a ruined creation, but he asks us for a moment to lift our eyes and to see Christ enthroned in glory. Christ gives us hope.

II. We live before God in hope:

And hope is a hard thing, a very hard thing to live in. Think about the cathedral. After the Coventry Cathedral had been bombed, it would have been easy for the people to do one of two things. They could have looked at the ruins in despair. Given up and walked away. Or they could have cleaned up the ruins, erased their memory, and built a new church where no one would even know the difference. One option lets the destruction triumph and denies any hope

of a future. The other option lets the future glory triumph and denies that suffering is real in this world. What they did, however, was something different. They held the suffering and the glory together in hope. They didn't walk away from the church, defeated by suffering, but built a new one. Yet, they didn't clear away the ruins and build on top of them. Instead, they left them as a reminder of suffering in this world. The ruins and the church stand together as a visible reminder that in the midst of the fallen creation God continues to rule in love and his rule gives us hope.

What happened at Coventry Cathedral decades ago happens in our lives every day. Every day, we are confronted by the suffering of our world and the sins of our flesh. Listen to the news; you can hear the suffering. Look at your heart; you can see the sin. For some, the temptation is to despair. They are tempted to give up, to lose hope, to believe that God has not conquered and to try to fend for themselves. For others, the temptation is to a foolish hope. They take a passage like this one from Romans, and use it to dismiss the very real pain and anguish of suffering. "*All things work together for good,*" they say, and it doesn't matter whether they are speaking to a mother who has lost her son in a drunk driving accident or a father who struggles to raise his children after a divorce. "*All things work together for good,*" they say, and yet their words don't recognize the real pain and evil in front of them.

Christian life in this world is neither of these options. It is actually a paradox – a strange combination of glory and suffering. We are certain of the glorious future that God has in store for us, we know and trust that all things work together for good, but we also see the reality of suffering in this world and are moved to sorrow and compassion for those in the midst of it. Seeing the ruins of this world, we do not give up hope. And seeing the hope of the future, we do not deny the suffering of this world. No, instead, we live in both worlds – in the reality of suffering and in the certainty of hope.

At the foot of this tapestry is an altar and, when you draw near to that altar, you experience this reality of suffering and hope. The closer you come to the tapestry, the harder it is to see Christ, high above you, ruling over all. What you do see, however, is what the artist placed at the very bottom of the tapestry. A picture for those who would dare to draw near. At the very bottom of the tapestry, where it draws closest to the earth, is a depiction of the cross. There is Christ crucified for all people. And His figure is seen most clearly when you come forward for communion. There, as you go to the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ, you experience both the reality of suffering, God's suffering for us, and the reality of hope, God's rule for us, in Christ.

We gather today at an altar without that tapestry. Consider the hymn of praise in our hymnal. "This is the Feast of Victory," we sing. Imagine what this must look like to those outside the church. If those outside the church looked in, they would not see a feast. All they would see was a small amount of wine and thin wafers of bread, a mere taste given to the people. Yet we sing, "This is the feast." If those outside the church looked in, they would not see victory. They would see people. Suffering people. We experience the same difficulties as others in the world. We are not immune to cancer, to mental disorders, to depression, to death. And yet, we sing, "This is the feast of victory." Why? Because we know that the victory of God has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is now present with us through His Word and Sacrament. Suffering and hope brought together here for you in love. He has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil and He rules over this world in love. Though we don't see Him now,

enthroned in glory, we know of that new creation and we rejoice in this Jesus, this One who gives us His body and blood and rules over us in love.

Conclusion:

And this love of Christ continues, long after our feast and song is over. The apostle Paul reminds us that “*Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*” Jesus is interceding for us. Often when artists depict Christ enthroned in glory, they show Him seated on a throne with one hand raised in blessing. That is not what you see on this tapestry. Instead, you see Jesus, sitting with both hands raised upward in prayer. This Jesus who died and rose and rules over all things intercedes for you. As you make your way home, as you enter into another week, He continues to pray for you. Jesus takes your suffering and burdens, your sins and sorrows, and presents them in prayer to His Father. Nothing you encounter, nothing you bring, can ever separate you from God. Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, 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. We are more than conquerors in Jesus who rules over these ruins in love. Amen.