

**“All things work for good?”**  
**sermon 24 July 05. St Augustine’s church. 9.30 Eucharist**

How often have you heard this Bible verse quoted in the last year?

“All things work together for the good of those who love God?”

Rom.8 v. 28.

It is, undoubtedly, a much-used verse, which can bring hope in times of difficulty, or somehow a ‘proof’ after we have come through a tricky situation, that God was really in control after all.....

But I wonder if we stop to consider what it really means, or what it means to someone who is, in the present, experiencing a huge amount of personal grief or anxiety or depression or a terminal illness perhaps?

What about those Christians in parts of the world where they are imprisoned , tortured and even killed for their love of Jesus? What does this verse mean to them?

Let me tell you a little about the central Asian republic of Uzbekistan.....which has for a long time been a battle ground between ancient Islamic tradition and modern hard line repression

Ruled by a soviet-style authoritarian, Uzbekistan has one of the worst human rights records in the region with up to eight thousand people in prison for their beliefs. There is no freedom of speech and a ban on all opposition parties.

The name Uzbek means ‘master of himself’ but many are seeking to enslave the Uzbeks: not just the government but also radical Islam, occultism and various sects. The country remains locked in authoritarian and repressive Soviet-style leadership. There is no freedom of speech or press. Proselytising Muslims is illegal. Many Muslims are tortured as being potential terrorist suspects.

most of the Christians can be found amongst the dwindling numbers of immigrant minorities. The Uzbeks only have at most a few thousand known Christians, most of whom are in the capital Tashkent, although the majority of the nation live in rural areas. **Evangelism carries a three year prison sentence.** Some are being converted through the ministry of imprisoned Christians. Literature and film restrictions make it difficult to publicise the gospel. We need to pray for the Lord to bring in a harvest in Uzbekistan.

Open Doors have asked us to pray for a young Christian brother named **Kural Bekjanov**, who is being tortured in prison in Tashkent, the capitol of Uzbekistan. Kural, who is just 19-years-old, was arrested on 14 June and has since been beaten by police officers and fellow prisoners who are trying to force him to abandon his Christian faith.

When his mother, **Gulya**, saw him on 26 June, he had lost weight, had difficulty walking and his fingers and legs were covered in blood. A church member said police threatened to put him on a chair wired up to the electricity supply.

Please pray that the Lord would have mercy on Kural and bring release from his suffering

- for courage for Kural to stand firm in his faith, acknowledging his Saviour Jesus before his persecutors (Luke 12:8)
- for protection for believers in Uzbekistan as the long-running campaign against them continues
- that the perpetrators of this anti-Christian campaign would come to know Christ.

What does it mean in this situation, for Kural and his family to say “ All things work together for good for those who love God” ?

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I think we need to put the verse into context.....

“ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.....” = all of v 28

God works in ‘*all things*’ not just in isolated incidents – for our good. This does not mean all that happens to us **IS** good, or that it will result in ‘happiness’. WE **know** that evil is prevalent in our fallen world. We have seen in the past few days, yet again, *indiscriminate targeting of people*, as terrorists [try to] attack London and undermine the society and daily life of those who live or work there.....

**But God IS able to turn every circumstance around for our long-range good. This is to fulfil his purpose.....**

*Those who, says Paul, are called* are those who the HS convinces and enables to receive Christ.....such people have a new perspective on life, a new mindset; they trust in God, not in life’s ‘*treasures*’; they look for their **security in heaven**, not on earth; they learn to accept, not resent, pain and persecution because **God is with them**.....what must it be like to be imprisoned for your faith in Christ? To be tortured.....to think you may never see you loved ones again?

A couple of weeks ago I had a dream in which I had been imprisoned on some bazaar trumped-up charges, which had no grounding in law, but in this dream, I knew that I was in this huge solid grey building because of **preaching the gospel**. I was not allowed to have visits from my family – I was totally isolated from anyone I knew and had no trial. In the dream I also knew that I would soon

be executed, and I wanted to be able to write a letter to each of my children, to say I loved them, to explain why I wasn't there to see them grow up and why this was happening to us.....but the authorities in the prison would not allow me to do that – *I could not even say 'goodbye'*.....The anguish and sadness and injustice and everything else I felt in the dream was so real – The fear, and the grief that I would never see my kids again, not even be able to write them a letter they could read when a bit older – all this stayed with me as I woke up.....it felt way too real! And it took me a few minutes to 'come to' and realise I was at home, in my own bed and all was well. But I still felt those real and frightening feelings, and at that moment, could, to some extent, empathise with those who are, in real life, facing such grim situations.

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There are 3 ways of translating this verse from Rom 8, but they all give us the same fundamental meaning. Many people take the attitude to life that '*everything will turn out all right in the end*' – often without thinking about the problems which exist. But Paul faced up to the problems, his trials and suffering for the gospel, and came to the conclusion that '***we know....***'

When Paul; wrote '**good**' here, that **God works everything for the good**, he was not thinking about our *comfort or prosperity or happiness*. He was talking about '**Man's greatest good**' which is salvation, or life with God.

In v29 he described it As being '*conformed to the image of his Son*' ie, being like Christ. This is God's purpose for **us**, and it should be *our* purpose for ourselves, 'In everything'.

Most Christians agree that we are travelling along the road to heaven – and regard some things as helping them along that road and other things as hindering.

But Paul wrote that **everything** helps us along that road. This is a surprising statement.

I daresay that during this past week or so, there may have been a number of things in your life which have ;*hindered*' you – when you have felt frustrated at work perhaps, or fed up with the kids, or extremely concerned about money, or worried about a personal relationship, or anxious about your own or a loved one's health.....

It is possible that, given **v18** of ch 8, Paul here is thinking about suffering. "***For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us***' he wrote . So here, still in the same chapter, he is meaning that even suffering which many of us may regard as '*evil*' can help to prepare us for our life with God and to make us more like Christ.

**The whole of our life now can be considered as one of conflict and tension.** God uses this to help prepare us for the 'good' which he purposes for us.

Let's look at 3 illustrations to see how this can work out in life –

1, **Job** – the obvious choice I suppose. Job was blessed by God. He was a rich man with all the wealth that this world affords. He was also a Godly and upright man. But he began to experience suffering. He felt that his suffering was evil – a terrible and unjust thing and he complained bitterly to God. But in the end God spoke to him, and he came to know God in a new way which would not have been possible for him apart from his suffering. Suffering became for Job the way –and the only way- of blessing.

2. An **athlete** deliberately suffers pain in the course of his training in order to equip his body for the contest which he hopes to win.

3. A young student knew he should serve God, but he decided that he would just live for his own pleasures while he was young, and think about God when he became older. But he fell sick, and the doctors said he would not get better. He became worse until he could not leave his bed. All this time his mother nursed him.....during this time of sickness he turned back to Christ, whom he had been trying to avoid for so long, and his mother also put her faith in God. Although the student died young, the 'good' was realized in the life of these 2 people – but only as a result of suffering.

Christians cannot always see how God is using unpleasant experiences to prepare them for the good, But they believe it to be so..... those who trust and love God as their own loving Father often learn, through life's experiences, to accept all that happens to them as His will for them.

In 1994, just a few months after Pete and I were first married, I became ill and had to stop work in the parish. For a few years I had had food allergies and quite nasty and sore flare-ups on my skin, like really bad eczema.. This time, my skin was so uncomfortable, very sore and without any elasticity, that every move I made caused great pain. In addition, when exerting myself to any degree – even brisk walking - I would experience intense shooting pains that would rush through my body.

The skin condition was so bad and so excruciating that Pete took me to stay with my parents who lived over 100 miles away, as I could no longer look after *myself*, let alone our home or my job. I became confined to bed, unable to move for the pain.....every area of skin was tight and sore and itchy all at the same time. No matter which professional medic I went to see, no-one could get to the bottom of it or bring much relief. The only relief I had was when soaking in a warm bath with a special oil in it, and this I did for on average 4 hours a day...I

would get through at least 4 litres of a special emollient cream each week, which I applied all over and my skin just 'drank' in.....

Well, I don't have time here to tell the whole story.....but the Lord did, in time, point us to a Christian-based complementary clinic in another part of England where I eventually was helped and, after almost 9 months off, was able to return to part-time work in the parish.....

All this is to say that, during my intense times of suffering, it was hard to pray and I couldn't physically hold a Bible to read it,; I had no idea why this was being allowed to happen, and I certainly didn't feel as if I grew closer to the Lord.....yet that verse from Rom 8.28 I still believed to be true, even though at the time I could see no good, and even years later, I am still not quite sure what was the 'good' that was worked through this, unless it was to gain a little more understanding of what it means to suffer.....??

As Paul looked back on *his* life, he could see that the events which at the time *appeared* to be disasters really worked out for good. If this has been our experience in the past then it gives us confidence in the future – **and I can, at least say that**. Paul also knew that God was in control of the affairs of the world. He has a purpose in all events – and especially he has a purpose for his people.

We are called *acc. to his purpose* –

And this purpose ( *acc. to R.Bowen*) has 5 stages –

1. **God foreknew his people**. It is not that God just knew *about* them, nor that he just knew what they would do. '*Know*;' here has the same meaning as in Amos 3, 2 "*You only have I known of all the families on earth*". Clearly God knows about all his creatures, but with his people He has a close rel'ship and a special love for them. Paul's meaning therefore is that God loved his people *before everything* – His love is the basis of everything which He does for them ( Eph 1.5 0
2. **He also 'predestined'** .this word,[ which I remember caused a lot of controversy in our youth gp when I was a teenager] – this word means '*set apart*'. He set apart his people, in the sense that he did so *before they knew Him* or loved Him; before they started to look for him; before Christ came to die for them; even before He created the world.....
3. **He also called**.....the first 2 stages took place long ago (note the prefixes - '*fore*' and '*pre*') Paul then showed how God fulfils His purpose in the lives and experience of human beings now. First, God 'calls' those

whom He has set apart. Through the announcement of His good news, God then *draws them to himself* and they respond by having faith in Jesus.

4. **He also justified**.....the word 'justify' means 'declare righteous' or 'count righteous'. The word comes from the law court and describes the action of a judge. IN the book of Romans, God is seen to justify both the 'righteous', the doers of the law (2.13) and the 'ungodly' i.e. He acquits the guilty. This seeming contradiction gives us a truer picture of God. *Because of Christ's death, God is able to declare sinners to be righteous (3.24) more than that; He does this without himself becoming unrighteous.* God justifies the sinner, yet unlike the unjust judge, He does so in a way that is right (3.26) 'we are made *right with God* (justified ) **This is the Gospel, and the heart of Paul's message**.....
5. **He also glorified**; this is the final stage in the Christian's experience. It does not take place in this life but in the future. But instead of writing '*he will glorify*' Paul used the past tense in order to show how certain it is that God will glorify His people – it is as if He has already done it! In the same way, prophets in the OT often used the past tense to indicate the certainties of events which they prophesied would happen in the future.

These 5 great acts of God show in what way God saves mankind. They show how God is fulfilling his eternal purpose for us, and they can be a real encouragement to all Christians.

### What does this mean for us?

>>That our salvation is not a matter of chance, not does it depend on **us**. **Yes, of course we need to respond to the gospel, to decide whether of not to put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ**, but it is **God** who calls us, who leads us to faith in His Son. Our salvation also involves us becoming more like Christ '*God set us apart to be like His Son*'. And His HS within us points us to Jesus and helps us be more like Him. **We cannot do it in and of ourselves**; we make decisions to walk in new ways for Him, but it is He who strengthens us and helps us in this walk.....**Our predestination is to be like Christ**; only those who are like Him will share His glory.....

Our salvation is the '*good*' for which God works, and therefore everything in our life works towards that end. Salvation as well as being a decision we make for Christ, is also an ongoing process – we are continually being saved and ultimately will be Saved at the end of our life on earth. Our salvation through Christ is a certainty which reaches its culmination, its ultimate fulfilment when we go to be with Him in Glory.

And all this is through the **Grace of God.**; God's love, His generosity seen in action on behalf of those who do not deserve it, including you and me.....

God's Riches At Christ's Expense.....

That song we just sung – “*I am a new creation, no more in condemnation, here in the grace of God I stand.....*” reiterates a truth for today – for those who have put their faith in Christ are ‘made new’, and therefore cannot be condemned by the evil one, for we have been set free because of the grace of God.....but it also suggests the **ongoing process** of salvation – that my love for God will keep on growing as we live and move and have our being in Him.

It would be great to be able to stand here and say that God makes life easy for all those who love Him. But it simply is not true. However, I can say to you that in all things **God is working to your best good** .Sometimes you or I will go through a difficult experience or time in our life, and hopefully it will make us stronger – you may have a new appreciation of your family or friends, for example.....more often than not, you'll grow to rely on the promises of God. We cannot know all of God's plan and purpose, but we know this; **Life can be hard, but God is good...**

We all know that verse now from Rom 8.28 “*and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to His purpose*” We may wonder how some of the things we have to go through can possibly be working for our good! But God himself in the next verse explains the ultimate good; the good that shines above everything else God wants us to have ‘*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.....*’ The good that Rom 8.28 is talking about is that we become like Jesus, conformed to His likeness. We could paraphrase it thus –“ **All things work together for the ultimate good purpose of making us like Jesus** “

**Let us pray.**