



# The power of connection

## Romans 8:26-39

Keeping connection is such an important aspect of life and especially in human relationships.

- Having just returned from Israel, Europe and North America
- Seeing family members we had not seen for a year!

Anyone who has been a parent knows the fear of losing contact with children when they reach the various stages of independence. I want to refer to this as connectedness.

This evening I am turning to one of the best known chapters of scripture, from Roman 8, where connectedness with God is one of the important themes. An overall marker for the context might be captured in the thought that those who love God and are called to follow him and his purposes for life will experience an intermingling of all things for good his or her life.

- The love of God is always a central issue for the Christian; it holds everything together
- The recognition that God is the all-wise One, who gives us meaning and significance to the quality of our lives
- God enables our lives to be transformed into his purpose.

The passage culminates in what must be one of the most lyrical passages Paul ever wrote. He emphasises our connectedness to God which, in turn, enables us to face each and every situation. Because we are joined to Christ, we cannot be torn from him, but held together through his grace.

The theologian of the comic strip, Charlie Brown, was talking with his friend Lucy about the deeper meaning of life. Lucy asked Charlie, "Do you think life has any meaning?" Charlie was considering the question and began to answer, when Lucy interrupted him with, "I mean, do you think life has any meaning after you've failed nine spelling tests in a row and the teacher hates you?" to which Charlie Brown calmly responds, "Now that's a different question!"

Recently I was reading about the origin of the word "sabotage". It comes from the French language, where a "sabot" is a wooden shoe not unlike a clog. In the past, some workers in French industrial factories, when they became unhappy, would throw a sabot into the machinery, thus sabotaging it.

Life can be extremely difficult as people struggle with loneliness, anxiety, anger and a thousand guilts. In such situations we can feel as though our life has been sabotaged. The contribution of the Christian in such trying times is that we remain vitally connected because of Jesus Christ.

We are currently at that time of the year when here in Sydney many people are talking about the finalists for the Archibald Prize. Carol and I have often observed the artwork selected for public display and it is obvious that there is much pain lying behind many of the portraits. We must live in the certain reality that life is filled with challenge and is often difficult to face.

Romans 8:35

*"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"*



Paul is sharing the nature of the good news as it applies to people's lives. The new Christians to whom he is writing were clearly facing testing times and a connected relationship with God is critical to their maintaining faith and hope. Indeed the suggestion is that the Spirit of God lifts our lives through this unbroken relationship in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Paul raises an important question: *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (v.31)

- People can be against us—and we may have examples in our own lives that confirm this
- Our own conscience can be against us—and we may feel ill at ease with ourselves
- The whole world can appear to be against us—his is unlikely, but it can feel that way.

Paul is really writing words of encouragement to what must have felt like a besieged Christian community. No-one and nothing can break the connectedness we have with God. It is as if Paul is cheering on the earliest followers with this truth. The Spirit of God is the clue. One writer commented, "The Spirit is more than a mere representative of God's presence in the process of pain ..."

We live in a different setting, but:

- We can feel discouraged—especially if we think life has treated us unfairly
- We can experience rejection by others
- We can feel we are wavering in our faith.

Paul is establishing a firm foundation that will empower and strengthen the lives of Christians, despite what happens to them. This can be a helpful passage to read in times of significant challenge or loss.

It doesn't surprise me that frequently it is used in services to mark the end of life. Our vital connectedness is not ended even in the presence of death. However, our tough times involve much more than facing death; there are all those experiences which expose our human weakness.

Each choice we make in life by necessity separates us from some other option. For this reason alone, it is wonderful to be able to declare that our lives are held firmly together by God's grasp on our future, as well as the present.

Rhetorically, Paul uses the question-and-answer format to make a powerful point. Paul asks, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" While the answer is clearly 'no-one', Paul seizes the opportunity to address a catalogue of challenging circumstances that he himself had faced: hardship, distress, persecution and so on. He then provides an even more challenging list of things that cannot separate us from God's love. This list includes 'death', 'rulers', 'things to come', 'powers' and "anything else in all creation". Paul is asserting confidence. In a world where our lives can so often be brought low, it is good to be assured of the unbreakable bond by which our lives are held.

I read the story of Arthur Gordon who visited a school classroom and observed how the teacher frequently reminded misbehaving children to stop being a 'WAM'. When they heard this, the children knew exactly what was being said, but Arthur didn't. So, following the lesson, he asked the teacher what WAM stood for—and was told it represented the words 'WHAT ABOUT ME'. The teacher wanted the children to be a 'WAY' or put simply 'WHAT ABOUT YOU'.

In the larger setting than the classroom, it is a lesson that all of us could learn.



The connectedness that is ours in Christ calls us to a concern for others – and not firstly to think about ourselves.

- God is for us and promises his love
- This promise enables us to grow in confidence
- God's power is at work through us.

Let us explore this further:

## **We are connected in relationship**

What God has done for us has brought us into a vital relationship with him and made us alive with and through the Spirit (Romans 8:11).

- This is the core of our belonging—it is not a distant, loose identity
- We are connected by choice in a living relationship
- This connectedness is a two-way relationship

We experience different kinds of relationship. In popular culture we can sometimes believe we are in a relationship with someone we have never met: pop stars, sports personalities or even political idols. It can be disappointing when we meet those who hold these positions, as our idols may have clay feet or at least fail to live up to our expectations.

The key to our unbreakable bond of faith and unshakeable quality of relationship in Christ is our common sense of calling. *"And we know that in all things God works for the good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (v.28) Paul established the firm foundation that will strengthen faith and trust.

Our belonging to Christ can be shaken by the sheer volume of suffering and pain in the world. Sometimes we can be falsely led to believe that we are protected from these things. However, we will never be sheltered from suffering, but our connectedness to Jesus Christ is made clear because he has shared human suffering with us. We find ourselves in a vital connection to one another at points of human need.

We were in London when the awful events at Grenfell Tower were unfolding. Investigation into the dreadful fire in North Kensington are continuing, but what was clear then, and indeed now, is that places of worship played a vital role in the community response to this sudden and somewhat unprecedented tragedy. Churches and mosques offered shelter.

The local minister at Notting Hill Methodist Church, the nearest place of worship to the block, was one of my successors in North Wales. He said, "There are times when all the words we say are not adequate and sometimes words fail us because no words can do justice to how we feel, or what has been seen or what has happened."

- However people were drawn together in support
- People felt a sense of connectedness
- For Christian people, this is a natural consequence of our life in Christ.



It is from this belonging to God in Christ that we discover we are joined with each other in a community of faith.

- We are a very different kind of people, but with one God and Father
- Our relationship in community is distinct from other connections we have
- Our relationship gives identity as to who we are—we are more than our interests and our employment!

This relationship connection bridges many of the human distinctions we easily make - of colour, background, gender and personality. We are bound together because of Christ and our experience at Wesley Mission is quite unique in this respect.

One of the greatest challenges we face is building a community where we really do care for one another—and do not simply acknowledge each other's existence. From the earliest days, Christians have found that it is our relationship with Christ that enables this to happen.

## **The relationship gives us confidence about life in Christ**

Because we are sure about this relationship, we are confident about our lives, even in the face of many challenges:

- In the face of many puzzling questions, faith is not a simple journey. We are challenged at almost every level of life.
- In the context of a great deal of evil and tragic outcomes, this has been our experience over the past few months. A conversation with a rabbi at Tel Aviv airport confirmed the perpetual nature of these matters.
- In the recognition that we are far from perfect, we contribute to the breakdown of relationships and communities.

This bond which unites us with God is an eternal bond. It is one of the greatest affirmations that Paul ever made: That nothing can separate us from God's love (v.v.38-39). It is a claim that nothing in this world (or indeed the next) can pry us from the Lord's loving hold on our lives.

Someone shared a devastating and yet comforting insight: “If we die without life, it is because we have fought God off all our lives.” Are we fighting God off, running from him? It is this kind of truth that is helpfully answered when Paul presents his catalogue of all the difficult experiences to be faced. He gives us confidence that we need never be separated from Christ.

Carl Jung was being interviewed by the BBC. He said, “Suddenly I understood that God was, for me at least, one of the most certain and immediate experiences... I do not believe. I know... I know.” And so can we!

## **A confident Christian is one connected to Christ**

The whole of our Christian lives can be defined in terms of our connection to God and then to each other. In Romans 8, Paul sets out his grounds for Christian hope. He presents it with passion.

- It could be that persecution has already fallen upon the church in Rome
- It will be relevant in so many different situations in history



- For many Christians today, it will be a very significant issue.

One of my former Bible teachers called this chapter the Everest of the Epistle. The Spirit of God strengthens the Christian in their weakness, enabling each and every challenge to become an opportunity.

- God takes the wasteful experiences of our lives and recycles them
- God gives us a bond of experience which ties us to him.

Having completed a large amount of air travel recently, I am reminded of the seatbelt announcement which always concludes in this way: "... even when the seatbelt warning light is turned off, we recommend you keep your belt fastened."

I read of a preacher who enthralled a congregation in the midst of a sermon by repeating the single observation, 'Life is hard'. She said it again and again, interspersed by many other words. I read that every time she repeated the phrase an increasing acknowledgement was evident in the room. Life IS hard!

Paul's list of those things which may cause us to feel separated from God are followed by the confident faith that nothing can actually separate us.

A popular writer explained what it means for a person to find faith. She wrote about someone who found peace in Christian experience, "He found, when he went honestly into it, not peace, but new involvements... with neighbour and the whole world." This was not the peace of feeling good after a hearty meal, but the feeling that someone was ultimately leading our lives.

As a Christian community, we will never be able to demonstrate the reconciling power of Christ to the world unless we have been grasped by its power in our own life and witness. The world, with all its pluralism of perspectives, will never be impressed by what we have to say until we really know what it means to be connected to Christ.