

This morning we meditate on the epistle reading – on the words of St Paul: ‘we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’.

This text is one that you may know well – it is often quoted, and a source of reassurance and strength to Christians, over many centuries. But this is the first time I am having a closer look into these verses – to understand what it really means.

Here Paul is talking about a chain of effects or consequences. A process that is going on in the hearts, minds and lives of believers – and explain how one thing leads to another. Paul says that this chain starts with suffering. And explain, how through suffering, love and spiritual maturity gradually grow – and a Christian’s life also grows in trust of God’s grace: trusting occasionally first – and then permanently. Paul says, suffering produces endurance – endurance produces character - and character produces hope. And hope doesn’t disappoint us because - it leads us to God.

I have seen this process taking place in the lives of many people - but have wondered how, until it became my experience. And now I fully understand what Paul says here.

A person enters into Christian faith – gets established – grows – deepens - and then something happens. While that faith was bringing great joy – then along, comes **suffering**. Things go wrong. And the Christian-experience is one of pain – frustration – and sorrow. But, by God’s grace, they are able to **endure** it, bare it - and at the end, they come out of it with their faith stronger. Their faith is somehow been tempered or hardened. Because they know something then, that they didn’t know before – they know that God can really be trusted in a crisis – God is faithful – God stays with you – and God helps you.

This deepening awareness stays with them – and that conviction builds a deeper pattern in their lives. A kind of framework is established. And when they meet difficulty again – they turn to God and trust on God’s grace and mercy again – and they find God faithful again – and able to **endure** it again. So, a pattern is established there more firmly – a pattern that Paul calls **character**.

And this is a very interesting word that he uses here. It’s a word that comes in Greek from the world of metal working and mending coins – and it refers to that process where the metal is purified and hardened by fire. We find the same image in other parts of the Bible also. In 1 Peter (1. 7) Peter talks about how our faith, which is more precious than gold is tested by fire – that it is purified and proved genuine. A smelter/goldsmith knows that the gold is ready when s/he sees his/her own reflection on the melted metal. More the heat, faster the impurities are removed – and it shines. And when he sees his own face on the metal, he brings it out of the heat to be moulded into what he desires. It is the smelter’s touch. Likewise God brings out our **character** through suffering. And this **character**, is tested and strengthened by fire, as life throws

up greater and greater challenges for us to deal with – and we discover that we can rely utterly on God at God's grace.

Paul says, the outcome of this **character** - is **hope**. We know that our life and our future is in God's loving hands. We know that we can't control everything that happens to us – and we don't know what is waiting for us around the bend in the future – but what we do know for sure is God's mercy both here and eternally. And we would be able to rest on that **hope** - and find security in that grace of God.

To place an example, I am hopeful that my marriage with my wife will continue. Despite the problems we encounter at times I know it is strong. Because it has been proved at times of difficulties.

Now, our relationship/marriage with God – is even more certain and more secure. We can hope on God more confidently because we know God's character. We know God's love – God's faithfulness - God's forgiveness and generosity – God's mercy and God's eternal patience with us.

But sometimes, we see a different process working in many people. It goes in the opposite direction. Suffering produces complaining – complaining produces misery and cynicism – misery and cynicism produces rage and despair – and rage and despair destroy them because their hearts are utterly empty - and they feel that there is no point in going on.

And we should not be too pious and fast in saying – well, that is what happens to unbelievers – to non-Christians who don't know Christ. No, this chain of events can unfold sometimes in our lives too – and form its own character.

Both these processes start with suffering. So, the difference is not that the Christians have problem-free lives - or they have things go right more of the time. No, suffering is part of human condition. But in the process that Paul mentions in the Bible, God is present; and in the other, God is closed out. So, they each forms a different character. Where God is open, there is hope. Because they have something extra to make use of – a resource which a way beyond anything we human beings have in ourselves.

Paul knows it as a seasoned Christian sufferer. His life was full of suffering - more suffering than most of us had to bear – or will have to bear. So, when Paul refers here to suffering and problems in life, he knows what he is talking about. Sufferings are God's special time for being particularly present with us.

We see many people, even after facing several tragedies one after other, living with confidence, their spirits up; while we see many others disappear from the scene. If we ask to those who have endured it 'what makes them keep going' - their answer is in the beginning of today's reading: Paul says, 'we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand'. Only after saying this Paul says, 'we boast in our sufferings...' – as we have access to the treasure house of divine grace. May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.