

If you go to Coventry Cathedral in England and stand before the altar, you will be overwhelmed by the tapestry that rises above you. 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, hanging above the altar, overwhelms in another way. It overwhelms with a message. 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 with a ‘yes’ 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 heart to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Let Paul bring you to God, in love, ruling over ruins.

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 during 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, had 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. 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 is that charred cross, that moment of our redemption, when Jesus Christ offered his sinless life for us. That charred cross is the ultimate sign that God is for you. In Christ. Listen to Paul. He begins, "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 this vision of Christ enthroned in glory. It is a vision that gives us hope.

And hope is both necessary and 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 a vision of 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. 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 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 a glorious future. And the present moment is transformed by Jesus, who rules over these ruins in love.