

Climate Catastrophe and Christian Hope
Romans 8:14-25
(A sermon by Richard Bauckham, 19 Sep 2021)

A few weeks ago I watched a television programme about the extreme weather that we have been seeing across the whole planet this year (I expect some of you will have seen it too). I found it terrifying. The extreme temperatures in Italy and Spain, the floods in Germany, the rampant wild fires across America and Siberia ... and more of the same in many other places. From the comfort of our secure homes in Newnham, where nothing worse than the overflowing of the Bin Brook ever seems to happen, it looked like we were witnessing the process, well underway, that is making the planet no longer habitable for humans – or for most of the myriads of wonderful lifeforms that share the earth and the oceans with us. It's not only the weather, of course, it's the melting of the glaciers and the polar ice cap, the depletion of fish stocks everywhere, the death of the coral reefs, the desertification of parts of Africa... But the extreme weather is especially terrifying because it brings home to us the extent to which the process is now unstoppable. We have lost decades of opportunity, and now, at a few minutes to midnight, the world certainly can and must act to mitigate catastrophe. But it is mitigation. Much that is underway cannot be stopped now, and much that we are losing cannot be restored.

What place then for hope? As Christians we are supposed to be good at hope. Every Easter now the secular media give a church leader or two a few minutes to say that the resurrection of Jesus is all about hope. They don't try to explain how or why it is any more a secure basis for hope than the Easter bunny. Virtually everyone, of course, agrees that we need hope, because if we were actually to pronounce our situation in this crisis of the planet's history *hopeless*, then we should give up doing of the things we can do to avert the worst that might come. In fact, it seems that human beings are genetically optimistic – for just that reason. We are programmed to look on the bright side because it was an evolutionary advantage. But like a lot of things that evolutionary science tells us that doesn't really help very much.

So let's see whether Paul does. The passage we read from Romans, about the groaning of creation and its hope of liberation, is not the easiest paragraph he ever wrote. But it's one where it's good to get the overall impression, even if some of individual points are obscure. I think it's one of those passages of scripture which may not seem to mean too much to many generations of Christians until suddenly they prove their relevance.

One thing that comes across loud and clear to me is the solidarity of the children of God, that's us believers who know God as Abba, the Father of Jesus and so also our father ... the solidarity of the children of God and the rest of the material creation. Our destiny is bound up with its and its destiny with ours. We share the suffering of the present time, the groaning as Paul puts it, and we share the hope of glory. We share those things with the glaciers and the forests, the oceans and deserts, and the myriads of creatures for whom all those habitats are home.

The point is that it is all God's creation – and notice I am avoiding the word environment with its human-centred implication. It is all God's creation, which God loves, and God did not create it to be a temporary backdrop for human history. He made it so that in the end it will share his eternity, just like us. In God's eyes the whole

creation has an unimaginably wonderful future – which Paul calls glory. The way God has made the world, it has hope baked into it.

That's part of our solidarity with the whole creation. So we cannot write off the rest of creation, be content with its destruction because we humans or we Christians really belong elsewhere. The hope of glory binds us and the rest of creation together.

But why, in Paul's understanding, is the whole creation groaning and in travail as it waits for its liberation. Part of the reason is surely that it groans under the burden of us, our abuse of it, our relentless trashing of it. Our sin, the persistent evil of human ways down the ages is not only a burden to us, impeding the destiny God has for us, but it's also a burden under which the whole creation groans. I doubt if humans have really been able to see that until now. And that's why the future glory of the whole creation, as Paul puts it, awaits *our* redemption. Creation is waiting for us to be free of the evil that burdens it. It waits with eager longing, he says, groaning under the weight of human sin, until it can share in the freedom of the glory of the children of God. It waits for our transformation that will make us a blessing to the world rather than a curse.

The whole creation waits in hope of that future, or at least that is God's hope for it. It's *hope* because it's not how things look right now. Paul is very clear about that at the end of the passage we read: "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what they see?" What we see may be the blazing forests and the torrents of destruction. But hope is not a mere pipedream. Hope, Paul would tell us, Christian hope, is well based in the resurrection of Jesus, which is God's promise of that glorious future for his whole creation, and also in what he calls in this passage "the first fruits of the Spirit." Listen to the whole sentence: "not only the creation groans, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

Like creation, we too groan, but it is hopeful that we do, because it shows that the Spirit of God, the transforming power of God, is at work in us. We groan because we yearn to be better people, for the world to be a better place, for the entail of human hubris and greed and arrogance that is trashing God's world to stop. Like creation itself, we long for the freedom of the glory of the children of God, when humans will be the unmixed blessing to the world that God intended when he designed us to be part of his creation.

Paul says "we have the first fruits of the Spirit." It's an agricultural metaphor. The farmer takes the first fruits of the harvest, the first sheaf or the first bunch, and dedicates it to God in his temple, thanking God for the harvest, because the first fruits are the beginning of the harvest to come. With the first fruits in hand, and with trust in God, he can count on bringing in the rest.

And so the Spirit in us now is the first fruits of the amazing harvest to come - the Spirit that, along with many another aspects of God's transforming power, stirs us to love God's creation as he does, to care about it, to protest at the damage we see it suffering, to do whatever we can. God's love for creation, that we experience when he shares it with us, is a powerful reason to hope.

Now I need, finally, to try to clarify something about Christian hope that it is easy to get wrong but very important I think. We need to distinguish between what I call ultimate hope and what I call proximate hopes. Ultimate hope is for the fulfilment of God's final purpose for his whole creation. That's the hope for the great glory in God's eternity that we cannot imagine but we know is the goal God has determined for the whole creation, ourselves included. That ultimate hope is sure and certain, based on God's promise that cannot fail. It is part of our faith in God to be sure of it.

But on the way to that ultimate future of all things we cannot be sure. We have no guarantee that the path to it will be smooth, rather the opposite. Ultimate hope is not a magic wand with which we can wave away the rising sea levels and the devastation of the earth. For the proximate future we can have only proximate hopes, fallible and revisable, hopes that may be daring but also tempered by realism. They are the sort of hopes we can have for the COP26 conference, the hopes we must have as we pray for the outcomes of that conference.

So does the ultimate hope make any difference here and now? What does Paul's conviction that the whole creation will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God mean for us as we try to face up to the overwhelming threat of climate change? I think has enormous power to sustain us, to inspire those more immediate hopes that we must have if we are not to despair and wash our hands of the whole thing. The ultimate hope assures us that the whole creation matters to God. Its wellbeing and its flourish are close to God's heart. And so whatever people can do to halt the devastation of the planet God will prosper those efforts.

One the ways in which God works in the world I like to think of in this way: God can make of what I do more than I can make of it myself. I'll say it again: God can make of what I do more than I can make of it myself. When I visited Ethiopia I came across a lovely parable of that principle. You may have heard of the fabulous rock cut churches of Lalibela, dating from the 12th century. They're a world heritage site. When you see them it seems miraculous that they could ever have been created. The legend about them is that king Lalibela has a great army of workmen who worked during the day, but during the night the angels lent a hand. And however much the human workmen accomplished during the day, the angels added twice that much during the night. It's a legend but I think there's a theological truth to it. God can make of what I do more than I can make of it myself.

That's why it's worth praying. And it's why it's worth doing what we can. Confronted with this looming global catastrophe, anything you or I can do may seem so trivial as not to be worth bothering with. But God doesn't see it that way. God delights to see us sharing his love for his creation. And it's not just that every little counts. It's better than that because God can make of what we do more, sometimes much more than we can make of it ourselves.