

**8<sup>th</sup> Sun after P: Cath: Gen 29:15-28; Ps 105:1-11; Rom 8:26-39; Matt 13:44-58**

Lord help us now to respond to your word today, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

“Unbelievable! You have all heard such an expression. And if we had time we could all recount stories that were unbelievable. Upfront has to be our present pandemic. Who would have thought that at the start of the year we would now all be in virtual lockdown? But I want us all to reflect on what we heard in our Bible readings today. If you can rightly remember the only response could well be - unbelievable. But of course it should not be a response like we might have to fairy stories or anything classed as fictitious. Behind all that we heard read today is none other than the God of the Universe. The one who is in charge.

If we are genuine in searching the scriptures it shouldn't take us long to be able to describe God as big. Little children can sing about God in this way: “My God is so big so strong and so mighty there's nothing my God cannot do.” But for many grown-ups the criticism of the Rev'd JB Phillips is apt: “Your God is too small.” So are you ready for me to give some staccato type points about God that St Paul makes in Romans ch 8 – a portion read as the epistle today. Here are ten sure-fired blessings for every Christian. Are you ready?

1) we're helped in our weakness 2) nothing can really go wrong 3) we're made to be like Jesus 4) we will be glorified 5) God's on our side 6) we have every blessing 7) we're not condemned 8) we're prayed for 9) we have God's love; and 10) nothing can separate us from God's love.

Because this passage of Scripture is listened to frequently we can all be a bit nonchalant about it. Even the language can be a bit too familiar. In a translation by Eugene Peterson entitled “The Message” here are those words in a contemporary translation: “Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. The Holy Spirit does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. God knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. God decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, God set them on a solid basis with himself.. And then, after getting them established, stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what God had begun.

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, Is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even point a finger? The one who died for us – who was raised to life for us! - is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture ....(then Paul goes on to say); I'm absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”

Do you know personally the way Jesus embraces us? Hear these words of invitation. Jesus said “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Each of us needs to affirm all that has occurred in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To do so we need to appropriate for ourselves personally all that Jesus has done. By our life, in word and deed that relationship with Jesus needs to be evident. When I look back over my own life I want to show how much I value the love of Jesus for myself personally. When I first came to trust Jesus in a personal way I was a young teenager. Knowing the love of God through knowing Jesus has meant more than my 20 years as a teacher, and now my 30 years in full-time ministry. And even though I have had a wonderful wife and children, the ingredient that has tied all this together is God's love in and through the Lord Jesus.

Do you know that love of God for yourself? Let me share with you how strong God's love is for you. In a very practical way God shows his love for us by helping us to pray. It's not just left to us to say our prayers. The promise is that the Holy Spirit comes to help us as we pray. One of the reasons why we cannot pray in the right way is because we cannot foresee the future. We cannot see a year or even an hour ahead. God knows this and as we pray we have the assurance of Go's guidance through life.

### 3.

Those of us who have children will know that they will want something that may turn out to harm them. Or as a parent we may have to refuse what a child wants because we know that it is bound to harm rather than help. The esteemed CH Dodd put it this way: “We cannot know our own real need; we cannot with our finite minds grasp God's plan. In the last analysis, the perfect prayer is simply: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Not my will but yours be done.”

In the concluding verses of Romans Ch 8 we are given an insight into God's life-long relationship with us. Paul makes the statement that all things work together for good, but only to those who love God. It is only to the person who loves and trusts that all things do work together for good knowing that all these things come from God. So the more a Christian reflects on God's guidance in life can we then grow more and more convinced of God's great love for us. We did nothing to bring this about. It is only in response to God's great love for us in Jesus that we dare even to affirm God's amazing blessings. That is why we can affirm the words in today's hymn :”Be thou my vision O Lord of my heart, naught be all else to me save that thou art thou my best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.”

Yes, I hope we can all affirm the desire of this hymn writer. But we would all agree that life isn't always straight forward. We often lose our way and so often it is because we go our own way. And yet it is unbelievable that God can use us warts and all for his glory. A casual look back to the story Jacob and his two wives is a good example of how God can work through the most crazy relationships. Unbelievable may well be your reaction. Yes, it may be unbelievable what God can do. But otherwise God wouldn't be God if God wasn't able to do that which is unbelievable! Yes, God can take us and use us for his glory. Even in this present pandemic God is with us. God continues to show his love. The whole of creation may be groaning but God isn't prepared to let Covid – 19 stop his love for us. And God has done all that is needed to secure our eternal glory. Unbelievable? Not unbelievable if we know who God is. St Paul's words invite us to internalise the truth he has been teaching to move us to a new level of confidence in God's provision for us. Paul concludes his celebration of God's love for us with his personal testimony: “I am persuaded.” or if you like: “I'm absolutely convinced”. So don't let anything separate you from God's love today. Affirm that truly God is on your side. God wants each of us to be like Jesus. 'Unbelievable you say?' God not only invites us to be like Jesus; God also provides all the necessary love and power to transform us - but only as we respond to God's invitation, no matter what mess we are in. Nothing or nobody is beyond God's love. **Let us pray:** O Lord, whatever else you withhold from me, satisfy me with your likeness. Renew my heart in the whole image of Jesus. Purge me from self-will. Fill me with faith and love. Draw me to you. Let me be emptied of myself, and let nothing separate me from your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**