

## Reflections on Saint Paul: Suffering

By Aidan Dewar

*“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” - Romans 5v3-5*

Through these words, Paul articulates the framework, demonstrated in the Gospels, of how we are to manifest God’s glory in a world still defined by sin, suffering and death. In doing so, Paul also offers encouragement to the church in Rome, with one of the hardest sells in Christian history.

Paul uses the beginning of Romans to set out the circumstances that have led to where we are now - Adam, sin, the law, the need for reconciliation and God’s faithfulness to us. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the continuity of God’s work within us, from our original calling to its final fulfillment.

As image bearers, our prime vocation is to reflect the glory of God but as we have fallen into sin we fail miserably in this task - sin being our attitudes and actions that move us further from the goodness of God. Suffering is not our purpose but has become our reality, as a consequence.

The willingness by which Christ embraced the depth of His suffering on the cross directly correlates to the depth of His love for us. To embrace our sufferings with the gladness of Christ, allows us to reflect also His love in a way that does justice to our calling as image bearers, once more.

We can rejoice in our sufferings because sin has been defeated through the resurrection. Our character then exalts our renewed relationship with God, which in turn creates the space for the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. So, whenever we experience tiredness, frustration, pain, grief, desperation; heartache etc. yet do not give in to despair, we invite God into our presence.

As for Christ’s suffering, our perception of crucifixion, through art and scripture does not capture its true awfulness in the way the emerging church in Rome would have experienced. This method of killing was reserved for slaves, enemies of the state and defeated peoples. The condemned would likely have been naked - no neat loin cloth - no protection for the eyes from pecking crows - suffocating under their own body weight. The vinegar soaked sponge Christ was offered, known as a xylopongium, was a soiled rag used to clean oneself after defecation. Crucifixion wasn’t simply a mode of execution, it was a means of humiliating the condemned beyond comprehension.

What madness it must have seemed for the church in Rome, in their attempts to convince the Romans that their salvation comes through the crucified.

All of this goes to show that God uses our sufferings, our weaknesses, our failure and transforms them into His ultimate victory. Life, purpose and radical hope.