

# Groaning for Freedom

*A sermon on Romans 8:18-27 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 September 2020*

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## Message

All creation waits impatiently for humanity to work and pray its way into the fullness of our identity in Christ, for only then will all creation be safe and free.

## Sermon

In a recent session, my pastoral supervisor asked me a challenging question. “What is *not* preaching regularly doing to you? Is it having any negative effects on your spiritual life?”

It was a good question. Before I preach, I have to dig prayerfully into the scriptures. That produces more fruits than make it into the sermon. If I’m doing a lot less of it, there will be consequences. I told her that I thought it was being more than offset by the new practice of daily congregational prayer, and I still think that.

But as I wrestled with the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans that I want to preach on tonight, I was reminded of her question. There are some complex ideas and images here, but after a while I began to unravel them and see connections with things that have been going on in our world and in our conversations here in recent months. I hope that some of the benefits of that are things I can now pass on to you.

I want to start with one of these connections as my way into the text.

Uncle Den has been very generous with us, opening up about his own story and helping us to understand what it is like for indigenous people to live under European occupation. Revisiting those wounds has cost him some pain, but he has graciously hung in there with us as we grope our way towards the truth.

One of the things Uncle Den has helped me to understand is how indigenous peoples’ hopes for the future are now unavoidably tied to conversion and change in the rest of us. You see, the colonisers are now more than 95% of the population, and are not about to disappear. So the way we colonising people live, think, behave and respond will have a huge impact on the realities and hopes of indigenous people’s lives.

To put it in the language of our reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, Aboriginal Australia waits, groaning and longing for the rest of the population to become the best it could be, to become the gracious, wise, respectful, understanding, truthful, and grounded people we were created to be, so that all creation, the land and its peoples, old and new, can be set free from bondage to destructiveness and despair, and obtain the freedom of the glory that was intended for all God’s children.

Those of us who have lived under a stage 4 lockdown for the last couple of months know the feeling of yearning for freedom. Even extreme introverts, who don’t miss the pressure to socialise, are longing for the freedom to enjoy their solitude in a wider range of interesting places. The lockdown also has that sense that our hopes for freedom are dependent on the attitudes and behaviours of others. If too many people defy the calls for careful social

distancing and mask wearing, then the spread of the virus will accelerate again, and we will all be locked up for longer.

To borrow Paul's language again: Melbourne waits with eager longing for the revealing of the magic numbers that will show that everybody has done what they needed to do and we can be set free from the present despondency and futility and obtain the freedom of the glory of life as it is supposed to be lived.

Now if you resonate with that feeling, multiply it by about a hundred, and you might be getting close to what Aboriginal people feel all the time about their need for us to wake up and change so that this land can be set free for life as it should be.

Now what the Apostle Paul was getting at was that the land itself feels like this too. The whole natural creation is groaning under its own lockdown, under its own oppressive colonisation by an ignorant and destructive human society. The earth is groaning as it longs for a new humanity to emerge, a human culture of wisdom and understanding and truth-telling, of respectful responsible behaviour, a human culture that treads lightly and reverently on the earth, nourishing and tending its healthy natural processes, and enabling it to reach the fullness of its glorious potential.

It's like a woman in labour, says the Apostle. The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains. Those of you who are mothers understand the power of this image. The rest of us have only been through labour as the emerging baby, and the memory of that is a bit hazy for most of us! But we know how concerned we are if we hear that a woman has been in labour for more than 24 hours. Everybody gets anxious. Will she have the strength and endurance to make the distance and bring this longed for baby safely into the world?

Well, Paul is telling us that the creation has been stuck in labour since the beginning of time, and the thing that's gone wrong, that's brought the progress to a standstill, is us. Only when we grow into what we were supposed to be can the new creation can be fully brought to birth. If we keep breaching the guidelines and crossing the boundaries of wisdom, and visiting the wrong people for the wrong reasons, and behaving in stupid contagious ways, the long labour will remain locked down in frustration and futility. Do those metaphors mix?!

Paul looks back to the story of the exodus from slavery and further back to the story we heard preached last week of Adam and Eve being kicked out of the garden. The land itself rebelled against our violent disrespect. What the apostle Paul is saying here is that in the resurrection of Jesus, we see the first fruits of the undoing of that curse, the reversal of the fall that alienated even the land.

In the resurrection of Jesus, we see the kind of new human that creation is groaning in labour to bring to birth. And creation is desperate to bring us to birth as a new humanity, not just for our benefit, but for its own sake, because only when we are born again as a fully formed, whole, wise, truthful human race, will creation itself be released from slavery – there's the exodus imagery – and set free to realise the fullness of its own glory, the fullness of all it was created to be.

How then shall we live? It is all very well to say that we have to grow into this new resurrection humanity, but how are we to approach that? It sounds a lot bigger than sorting

our garbage into colour coded recycling bins, and it certainly is, although recycling is better than nothing at all.

Paul advocates two things for us: patience and prayer.

The patience thing is a paradox here because Paul's advocating it while expressing some urgency about the needed change. But the thing with change is that we can really only take responsibility for changing ourselves. It is always tempting though to give far more attention to other people and to get impatient to see big changes in them.

But the thing is, when it comes to growing into the new humanity revealed in Jesus, into the new life of wisdom and compassion and responsibility, impatiently pointing the finger at others is completely counter-productive. It makes us hostile and angry and divisive. It pushes us in entirely the wrong direction.

So, as Jesus taught, we can be tough and demanding on ourselves, but we need to show patience and compassion and understanding for others. In reality, that is far more likely to inspire positive change in others, as well as nurturing in ourselves the characteristics we need.

The call to prayer is clearer, and Paul gives us here one of the most memorable and powerful images of prayer in the whole Bible:

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

This image emerges directly from what he has just been saying about about the deep groaning of creation. The land is yearning, we are yearning, the Spirit is yearning. Those three join up into one great prayer drawing all of us on towards the fulfilment of our destiny.

But in our weaknesses, Paul says, we often can't put into words the deep yearnings of our hearts. This is different from the odd silence that sometimes seems to afflict us at our daily 5 o'clock Vespers. I may be misjudging, but that always feels more timid and lethargic than the urgent anguished yearning that comes from deep within and almost brings us to tears with the frustration of being unable to find words big enough and passionate enough and expressive enough.

We can barely begin to imagine what it would be like for all of creation to be fully drawn into the resurrection life of Jesus, let alone find words to put it into intelligible prayer. But, says Paul, that doesn't stop the prayer from pouring forth. The Spirit yearns and groans within us, gathering up our lost-for-words prayers, and presenting it all to God, who knows what it all means.

So don't hold back from entering deeply into prayer. This deep prayer, this yearning groaning reaching towards new life and towards the awesome fulfilment of our potential, is part of actually making that terrifying journey. I say terrifying, because as Marianne Williamson once wrote (no it wasn't Nelson Mandela), "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."

Many of us feel quite comfortable and secure in our inadequacies. “Oh, I could never do that. I could never make a difference. I’ll just keep quiet and let the talented people do it.” Well, as Williamson’s quote continues, “You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.”

Your deepest and scariest yearning is to break free of your comfortable imaginary inadequacies and be the person God created you to be and really make a difference. You don’t have to find words for that, but if you take time to calm the distractions and listen to your heart, to listen to the deep groaning of the Spirit praying inarticulately within you, you will recognise that call, that challenge. You’ll recognise the fear too, but that’s okay. Fear is perfectly normal and appropriate when you are called to such awesomeness. Surrender yourself to the Spirit’s prayer and allow yourself to be carried on that prayer into new life, and all creation will be the better for it, a step closer to the fulfilment of its own hope for freedom.

God’s intention from the beginning was to govern and tend the whole creation through us, the human race, God’s own image-bearers. We’ve screwed that up right from the start, but we humans have so much power for good or evil that we remain creation’s only hope as well as its greatest threat. In Jesus, we’ve seen the true way. He has come to lead the rest of us into our true identity, into the destiny for which we were created, into the fullness of wisdom and grace and truthfulness and care that are needed to tend the earth and bring it to its flourishing potential. And for the coming of that day on this, all creation groans and shudders in eager expectation.