

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

"The Power of the Gospel"

WHAT IS GOD'S GREATEST PROMISE?

You have heard me say before that in life we do not walk by our feelings nor do we trust in our feelings. Rather God and His Word teaches us to walk by faith, and specifically in the promises of God. So what I would like to do is ask, "What do you think is the greatest promise of God?" I know some would say "salvation." That would be a good guess. Others might say forgiveness or heaven. Certainly they are all wrapped up in the promise of salvation. Maybe one might add Jesus' promise that He goes to prepare a place for us that where He is there we may also be. But actually there is one promise that encapsulates all of the promises of God, and that includes salvation itself. That promise is found in our second reading today. I want us to look again at the reading to see if you can find it.

The Apostle Paul is addressing the Church in Rome. His letter to the Romans is the best articulation of the Christian faith that you will find anywhere in the world, and that of course would include the Bible itself. Paul writes in **Romans 8:31-39**: *"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us 35Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." 37But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Did you catch it? The greatest promise of God is what Paul says at the end of **Romans 8** – *"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* In other words NOTHING can separate us from the love of God IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD. And it is that ending that is most important. In other words, when we are in Christ Jesus, there is absolutely nothing that will keep you from the love of God and this means eternally! And it is when we are in Christ and He is our Lord that His love is completely in our life.

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Notice Paul starts with the greatest tragedy that we all experience in life – death! It is why this passage in the Anglican Church is one of the appointed Scriptures that can be chosen to be read at one's funeral. Last fall was the 20th anniversary of Princess Diana's funeral in Westminster Abbey. I remember watching that funeral. It was watched or listened to by an estimated 2.5 billion people! But there was only one Scripture

passage read even though it was a service of Christian Burial in an Anglican Cathedral. Prime Minister Tony Blair got up to read Paul's passage from **I Cor. 13** on love. Most of us know the chapter. It is usually read at weddings but not funerals. While it is a beautiful overview of what God's love entails, there is no mention of Christ in that passage. Certainly Paul is talking about Christ-centered love, but unless someone reads before and afterward they are not going to know. And many of those 2.5 billion would not know that the power behind the love expressed by Paul is the Lord Jesus Christ!

What a missed opportunity! The funeral of Princess Diana was all about her; it was more about her love than God's love. What she forgot, what her family forgot, is that ***we love because God first loved us (I Jn. 4:19)***. Jesus said in **Jn. 3:16** ***"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life!"***

I know as the body of Billy Graham is laid to rest this week after 99 years of faithful ministry that his funeral is going to be all about Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, may all of our funerals be all about Jesus Christ, about His Love! About His power! About His death and resurrection!

THE LOVE OF CHRIST IS WHAT MATTERS

The truth is that God's love has been fully expressed in the Person of Jesus Christ. It is only in Christ that we can fully experience and know the love of God. It is only in Christ that we can have assurance of a right relationship with God. It is only in Christ that our sin can be taken away. It is only in Christ that we can have new life. And it is only in Christ that nothing can separate us from God's love.

There is a reason why the Apostle John wrote in his first letter in **1 John 4:18** that ***"perfect love casts out fear."*** But what does He say before and after that statement? ***"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.18There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. 19We love, because He first loved us."***

The reason why there is no separation from God's love in Christ is because there is now no condemnation in Christ! Look how Paul begins **chapter 8:1-2**, ***"There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death."***

Did you catch that? We are free from the law of sin. What is the law of sin and death? The law of sin and death is the principle that the one who sins dies. Death runs in your family and death runs in my family. We are all going to experience physical death. But spiritual death is far worse than a physical death. Spiritual death is eternal. Just as spiritual life is eternal. And the only One who can give us eternal life is the One who gave us our physical and spiritual life to begin with. There are only three problems in life that man can't solve – sin, sorrow, and death. All three go hand in hand and all three can only be remedied by God; and they are in His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus tells us not to fear death if we are in Him. And He said the most concerning not to fear death on the night BEFORE He died. He said in **John 14:1-3** "*Don't let your hearts be troubled believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's House are many dwelling places, if it were not so, I would I have told you for I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am, there you may be also.*" Thereby assuring the disciples not to be overwhelmed with what would happen the next day. They were certainly overwhelmed anyway but if they had placed their faith in Christ and His Word, they would have been able to overcome their emotions of fear, anxiety and worry when their Lord was taken away to be crucified. Paul just told us not to fear death. And **Hebrews 2:14-15** tells us "*Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.*"

It is amazing how the number of near-death experiences take away the fear of death and have led to changed lives and a renewed sense of purpose. Of course, we don't hear of those that were awful. But the truth is that some have had hellish experiences that have led to conversions to Christ as well. Near-death experiences are true but they are not the whole story. It is what one does with the experience that makes all the difference. They are only good if they lead one to Christ.

We have talked about death, but what about life? Life sometimes can be harder than death. We can get overwhelmed by our circumstances – the stress, the disappointments, the pain. Paul highlights this when he asks "*Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (execution)?*" And his response, No! "*But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.*"

We don't just have to conquer but we can overwhelmingly conquer!

But what is the only remedy? Knowing that God loves you in Christ. That ultimately is all that matters. As Paul wrote, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" You say that the world can be against us? That is true. Jesus said concerning the world, "*It hated Me before it hated you.*" And "*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.*" The world is against you. But not just the world. The Devil is certainly against us. The Apostle Peter says in **1 Peter 5:8-9**, "*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*" But do you know what the Apostle Peter then says, **9**"*But resist him, firm in your faith,*" And he will flee from you! (**James 4:7**)

It is why Paul says, "*For neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing!*" Not Satan or any other angel, nor any power in the universe, not the present or the future, no created being or thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

So how do we overcome? Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His Word! For do you know how Jesus is showing His love every moment on behalf of each of us? He is making intercession for us at the right hand of the Father. He has your back. He has my back.

Did you know that when they were building the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco back in the 1930's, as it began to be built so high above those swirling icy waters below, that some of the men doing the

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iron work would look down, get dizzy and become frightened. They could hardly concentrate on their work, and some of the workers let go and plunged to their death. This became a major problem and terrible publicity. So at great expense, a net was built under that bridge, a safety net for the workers. When the safety net was there, do you think more men or fewer men fell? Fewer. They didn't say, "The net's there; I can be careless now." No, they said, "The net is there, now I can concentrate on what I'm doing." You see, when you know that you are loved by Jesus, you can take all that energy of worrying about things, of being fearful and anxious about the what ifs and the hypotheticals in life, and instead just put it into trusting and serving Jesus! And do you know what? You will be more than just a conqueror; you will overwhelmingly conquer in Him!

For it is the love of Christ that will sustain and see us through! That, my brothers and sisters, is why we have hope; it is why we have purpose; it is what makes life worth living!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!