# Romans 5.1-5

Proverbs 8.1-4
15th June 2025

## The Crossroads of Life

Where were you on 11th February 1990?

Like millions of people around the world I was watching those TV pictures, organised by our good friend and church member Peter Burdin when he ran the South African bureaux of the BBC, images of Nelson Mandela leaving prison after being incarcerated for 27 years. Back in 1962 he was given a life sentence as a terrorist who had conspired to overthrow the state.

For years there was a permanent camp outside South Africa House on Trafalgar Square with placards campaigning against apartheid and calling for his release. Another student and I ran a prayer group for that campaign at Theological College, until the faculty closed us down for being too politically radical – ah, my subversive phase!!

I remember being amazed at the TV pictures that day. A man, who nobody had seen for 27 years, viewed as a terrorist, incarcerated with hard labour, walked free wearing a smart suit, smiling and exuding not bitterness and revenge but the possibility of hope and healing.

Suffering did not crush President Mandella. He had to get through it, of course, and that couldn’t have been easy. Yet he wasn’t permanently diminished by it. With enormous courage and great conviction, he grew during those years in jail into one of the finest and most inspirational human beings our world has ever known. He stood at a crossroads moment in modern history, and he helped the world take a good turning.

I’m struck, this morning, by St Paul’s words in Romans 5.3 when he talks of the kind of suffering in life that ends up bringing hope. Suffering that doesn’t flaw us, at least not for ever. The kind that doesn’t make us bitter. Suffering, or perhaps we might say, a kind of response to suffering, that helps us grow not in despair but in hope.

Now Paul was an educated Jew whose family, we think, had Roman citizenship. Therefore, he knew a thing or two about living between two cultures and not being accepted by either. Even his Christian credentials were viewed as spurious by some in the early church because he was a late addition as an apostle, not part of the original twelve.

This meant that Paul was no stranger to fierce criticism. He seemed to get it in the neck from everyone. Yet, he said, he wasn’t ashamed of this criticism, of this element of personal suffering and insult in his life.

And maybe that’s a surprise. Because the Roman part of Paul had a Culture of Shame, and Shaming which he had evidently broken away from.

Rather like celebrity Instagram posts today which attempt both the illusion and the delusion that life is just one round of success after another, the Romans hated failure. A family’s reputation could so easily be shot to pieces by a wayward son. A bad money deal by a distant cousin could set tongues wagging and damage a rising politician’s chances of ever wearing a senator’s toga. Reputation meant everything to high flying Romans and failure wasn’t an option. And so great effort was put into maintaining the mirage that life was perfect.

Paul breaks away from that way of thinking in Romans 5 and instead goes some way to actually embrace suffering positively. He doesn’t view failure, struggle or personal challenges as an end story; indeed, he says he’s not ashamed of this kind of suffering. Instead, he believes that through it, personally, he can grow and by it The Church becomes a place of integrity, endurance and, eventually hope.

So, perhaps the Romans got it wrong. Life is never just one success after another and that should neither be our expectation nor the way we present ourselves. I don’t know about you, but in my more reflective moments, as I look back, sure I enjoyed the successes, but perhaps I’ve learnt more from the failures.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan Priest and very popular American writer. He loves taking conferences helping young men transition into adulthood bringing their faith along with them. He says that at the start of their weekend away together he often introduces the first session noting that although many of them come across as angry, his hunch is that most people in the room are actually sad. He says, you can normally hear a pin drop. In an instant they realise that what they had perceived as anger at the way life has treated them is in fact sadness at the tough moments that have come their way. Once, he says, they’ve made that discovery, they spend the rest of the weekend trying to learn lessons from that suffering. In Richard Rohr’s view, suffering is one of life’s best teachers.

Indeed, perhaps it explains why, in a conversation I had the other day with a friend, they told me they only really liked sad music! Now I know that may seem a bit strange, but really this person isn’t strange at all!! I think what they were saying is that songs and tunes in a minor key moved them to contemplate something of the more profound side of life, and they found that very valuable. Well, perhaps you can have a discussion about the value of sad music over the coffee and biscuits after church!

What we surely all know, and I guess this was self-evident at the recent VE Day commemorations, is that struggle, whether its personal or national, puts life in perspective and often makes life’s values and meanings shine brighter.

Well, I think we need some help from God to think like this, and that’s where today’s first reading from Proverbs, set for today, helps us.

Proverbs chapter 8 has some of the most beautiful poetry of all the Jewish Scriptures. Just listen again to its opening verses: *Hear how wisdom calls and understanding lifts her voice. She takes her stand at the crossroads, by the wayside, at the top of the hill. It is to you I call…*

Today is Trinity Sunday and I’ve a hunch that many preachers will be attempting to help their congregations with definitions of God, so here’s one more to throw into the mix – God, described in the feminine as Wisdom.

The first half of Proverbs isn’t too specific about what it means to live wisely, that’s found in the second half as honesty in business, integrity in governance, compassion in relationships and faithfulness in worship is listed as examples of living with wisdom.

However, chapter eight has this beautiful image of Wisdom standing at the crossroads. Maybe about to prompt us, to help us make that decision about which road to take. We’ve been there so many times, we’ve had so many crossroad’s moments. Proverbs urges us to sense we are not alone at the crossroads. Wisdom – God’s Wisdom, she stands, as it were, beside us.

This help, this sense of God’s hand guiding and prompting, isn’t just for special people. Proverbs 8 says God’s Wisdom is available to everyone – actually it puts it more poetically than that. It says wisdom calls to *those by the wayside, those up the hill, and to others at the gate. It is to you I call, says Wisdom, to all.*

You know we sometimes call our faith practices *disciplines.* That’s because they take some effort. We have to purposefully dedicate time to think, to pray, to worship and to listen out for God’s Wisdom. It’s a choice. It’s a healthy discipline. And we do it in the hope that we’ll be able to make good choices at the crossroads with God’s help.

Now I want to bring this sermon to an end by trying to tie together our two readings.

Gordon Wilson stood at a cruel crossroads in his life on the evening of 8th November 1987. At the Remembrance Day parade earlier that day in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh he lost his beloved daughter Marie in a bombing by the Provisional IRA.

Just hours afterwards in a TV interview he spoke of his final conversation with Marie as they held hands as she lay dying and to everyone’s shock he said: *I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge.*

Gordon Wilson was a lifelong Methodist and that call for forgiveness and reconciliation became known as The Spirit of Enniskillen, and the Irish historian, Jonathan Bardon said of Wilson: *No words in more than 25 years of violence in Northern Ireland had such a powerful, emotional impact.*Gordon Wilson, Senator Wilson as he became, stood, as it were, at the crossroads on a day of immense. suffering. I think he believed that just as he held Maries’ hand, so Wisdom, God’s Wisdom, held his. So that even at the hour of his deepest suffering this wonderful man spoke wonderful words of peace and hope.

Thanks be to God for every moment, especially at the toughest of moments, when God’s Wisdom guides us to take a good road at the many crossroads of life. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 13th June 2025*