

Overcoming

Psalm 105:1-10; Romans 8:31-39

It's hard for many hearing the word 'overcoming' and not think of the protest song, 'We shall overcome', so readily associated with the civil rights movement. The song we know was based on a hymn written in America around 1900:

*The world is one great battlefield,
With forces all arrayed;
If in my heart I do not yield,
I'll overcome some day.*

It was based on another verse from Paul's letters, Galatians, 'Ye shall overcome if ye faint not.'¹

In October 1945 in Charleston, South Carolina, members of a trade union, mostly female and African American, began a five-month strike against the American Tobacco Company. To keep their spirits up during the cold, wet winter of 1945-1946, one of the strikers, a woman named Lucille Simmons led the strikers in the song at the end of each day's picketing.

Martin Luther King heard the song in 1957 and slowly it became used more and more in the American Civil Rights Movement. King used the words in his final sermon in 1968, not long before he was assassinated:

*We shall overcome. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome.
And I believe it because somehow the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends
towards justice.*

'We shall overcome' was song days later by the 50,000 attendees at Martin Luther King's funeral. In this well-known passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans, sometimes heard at funerals, the idea of overcoming is not far away. Written to a small group of Christians in the capital of the Roman Empire, Paul wanted to give them a word of encouragement in the frightening days of their lives. At any moment they could have been betrayed to the authorities. The great persecutions had not yet started, but the Jews, for that's what Christians were, a sect of Judaism, were seen as somewhat suspect. Their religious practices were odd to the Romans, and their

allegiance to the Empire was often called into question. The Christians, a very small group, were seen as even more suspect and strange. Paul therefore writes to give them encouragement.

- In this famous passage from Paul's letter, he asks, "If God is for us, who is against us?" What does it mean to have God 'for' you?

It is a dangerous thing to claim that God is on your side. Many battles and many wars have been fought by opposing sides who claimed that God was on their side. Who then can win? The presumption, and it is a presumption, is that somehow we control God and that God will therefore approve of all we do. 'Surely God would want to be like us? We are civilised, humane, kind; our values are surely God's values.' All those stained glass windows with Jesus as a blond, blue-eyed Victorian man.

But if we are saying, 'God is *for us*', it is God Who is doing the choosing. God is the active agent. God often chooses us *despite* our values, circumstances, and even beliefs. Remembering this, we can then begin to comprehend what it means to work alongside a God Who is *for us*. We are not through the pandemic yet, but in many ways things are beginning to move. We need to remember that God was *for us* before, during and after. For those feeling embattled, brow-beaten, forgotten, overwhelmed, anxious, timid, God is *for you*. Whoever you are, whatever your circumstance. Standing right beside you. Helping and holding and encouraging. We could not go on, we could not overcome, if this were not so. Why would God bother with the likes of us? Because God always does. It's God's nature. God is for us. God is for you, God is for me. That is wonderful

- Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and goes on to list, "tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword." When do you feel separated from Jesus?

Separation is a genuine issue in our lives. Every choice we make in life inevitably separates us from some other option. We cannot do everything so, when we do anything, we must exclude something. Even the most natural thing like growing up involves leaving something behind. Most grow up to leave home; we all move on from school and university, and few now will start a job and stay in it for life. Death comes to us all, and the parting can often be painful. At the very heart

of what it means to be human is separation from those things and people we love. To be human is to live with loss and grief.

How do we cope? Part of the genius of what Paul writes is his understanding of loss and grief and separation. He lists many of them: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. This time of social isolation can be added, and the pressures it has put us all under, great and small. Life is hard. Life *is* hard. The hardness of life, the struggle it presents us nearly every day, is easy to pass over, but difficult ultimately to ignore. It is no sign of weakness to say this out loud.

The weight of that list Paul gives, to which we add, brings separation into our lives and might appear to tip a scale of surviving over. But will we be overturned? “No”, says Paul. We shall overcome. Why? How? Because God is with us, and we are not alone.

- Paul say that in Jesus, “We are more than conquerors”. What do you need to overcome in your life?

In fact, what Paul says is, “We are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us.” We will overcome, because of love. God’s love, and the love of the people round about us who show, whether we merit it or not, that the care for us, that the understand us, that they accept us, that they love us. And this love will be enough for us to overcome the fear of death, or life, or the unfairness of the powers that be, or the reality of injustice, or any of the dimensions of inequality and unfairness throughout time that target us, but will not, in the end, overwhelm us. Because of God’s unshakeable love.

If we have hope in the midst of trouble, it rests on God’s love. God’s love makes us God’s own children, and the hope this gives to every single one of us can never be taken away.

There is much that needs to be overcome in life, some of it easy, some of it less so. Some of it major, some of it really quite trivial. The mistake many of us so often make is we try to do it on our own, when in fact that will never work. We need God. And when we work with God, when we let God in, when we let God help, when we let God make a difference in us, then we will, in the end, overcome.

This is the power of what Paul writes about in Romans, this understanding that with God's love, is what will help us live that song, 'We shall overcome'. With God, we will.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Galatians 6:9 King James Version