

“Our God Rules!”

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:28-39

“We are more than conquerors through him who loved us” Romans 8:37

On November 14, 1940, during WWII, the city of Coventry in England was bombed. The bombing was part of Hitler’s *blitzkrieg*, or “lightning war”—an attempt to overwhelm the opposition with a quick and devastating attack. In this particular offensive effort, Coventry Cathedral in England became one of the victims of the destruction. In one night, Coventry Cathedral, a place of worship since the eleventh century, for over nine hundred years, was reduced to a pile of wood and stones.

When God’s people at Coventry arose the following morning to survey the ruins, they charted two possible paths for the future. They concluded that they could look at the ruins and walk away in despair. They could go somewhere else and build a new Cathedral—a fresh start in a new place. They could even go somewhere else and join another group of worshipers at another place of worship. They also concluded that they could follow a second path and clean up the ruins, erasing the memory. They could build a new church in that spot so that, in time, no one would know the difference. Down one path destruction would triumph. Down the other path a kind of false glory would prevail. In removing the rubble, God’s people would, in a sense, be denying that suffering is real (Adapted from David Schmitt, *Man of God Strong to Serve*, page 46).

You and I can relate to the worshippers of Coventry Cathedral. We know the ruins all too well. There are moments day in and day out, week in and week out, that we find ourselves sorting through the pieces, attempting to chart a path for the future. The ruins we confront are not the result of a WWII air strike, but our ruins can leave us with a similar effect of hopelessness, despair, a longing for a do-over, a fresh start.

The ruins we might confront are those caused by things more subtle than highly explosive bombs. Yet the effect can be just as dangerous. We know these causes by names like jealousy, envy, anger, or hatred. These forces can sow seeds in our hearts and the hearts of others that can bear very deadly fruit. When the seeds of forces like jealousy, envy, anger, or hatred become full grown, they can make ruin of our relationships. They can breed gossip that gives way to distrust and can quickly dissolve a friendship or a family bond. These seeds can bear the fruit of covetousness that can give way to dishonesty and stealing. There is also a force we call lust that can breed marital unfaithfulness in a variety of different ways and make ruin of a marriage. We might identify things like cancers and other diseases and sicknesses that make a mess of our bodies and put stress and strain on our friendships and families. Yes, we know the ruins and the causes of those ruins all too well.

We are also familiar with the ultimate source of those causes that we identify as jealousy, envy, anger, hatred, lust, sickness, and disease. The Bible calls this ultimate source Sin and evil. This source is that which is opposed to our Holy God and his Holy Word and Will. It manifests itself in our hearts and minds and lives through jealousy, envy, anger, hatred, lust, sickness, and disease and it leaves in its wake

an incredible path of destruction. It can destroy our minds, our bodies, our emotions, our relationships with others, and even our faith in God. Yes, Sin and evil can create a heap of ruins in our personal lives that is far more tragic and devastating than any *blitzkrieg* can produce.

We know the ruins of Sin and evil all too well and so we often find ourselves sorting through them, considering how to proceed, wondering if it is even possible to live with them. So we examine the ruins and we might conclude, like those Coventry Cathedral worshipers, that we have two paths.

On the one hand, we could walk away in despair. And many have done that. Some look at the ruins of a struggling, difficult marital relationship and abandon their promise by filing for a divorce. Some might look at the damage that Sin and its manifested forms have caused in their friendships and families and they decide to cut off communication and contact, letting un-forgiveness, anger, and bitterness reign. Some might survey the damage caused to their minds and bodies by sickness and disease and decide to walk away by taking their own lives, “pulling the plug,” or considering euthanasia as a viable alternative. Some have even surveyed the ruins and concluded that there must not be a loving God that exists. So they have turned away from Him, from the Church, and from their faith in Christ. They have turned away in anger. They have turned away in sadness. So we could look at the ruins and destruction caused by Sin and evil and let hopelessness and despair rule.

The other option is that we could sweep things up, put on a pleasant front and pretend things are okay and that nothing is wrong. So we could try to deny that the pain and suffering is real. We could refuse to talk about the relationship issues and problems with our spouse, friends, family, or even congregation members. We could refuse to seek treatment for an illness or disease. We could insist that struggle, pain, and suffering doesn’t exist and that it is not and should not be a part of our relationship with God. Down this path a kind of false glory rules.

In our epistle reading Paul presents us with a third option. We will call that path, “hope.” Hope and trust in our God who rules over the ruins. He rules in spite of the ruins caused by Sin and evil as it manifests itself in our lives through things like jealousy, envy, anger, hatred, lust, sickness, disease, and even unbelief. In our reading Paul clearly acknowledges that the ruins exist. He mentions them earlier in chapter 8 of Romans. He calls them “sufferings of the present time” (vs. 18). They are the sufferings we know all too well. In our reading this morning he even gives a list that contains some of the ruins and their causes—“tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword” (vs. 35). The ruins are there, vivid and clear in the writing of Paul. He does not walk away from them in despair. Neither does he sweep them up and pretend they don’t exist, as if to present us with a kind of false glory. On the contrary, Paul boldly and courageously names those sufferings and ruins for what they are.

The Apostle also presents us with our God who is powerful enough to rule over the ruins for us. By not sparing his own Son our God was able to rule and conquer over the ruins, the suffering, the distress, all things, for us. Through a cross he defeated once and for all the guilt and condemnation of the source of all destruction, suffering, and ruin—Sin, evil, and even its accomplices, death, Hell, and Satan himself. In Christ our God poured out his wrath on one man who was *conquered, overcome, condemned, and separated* for us. Through Christ and his death and resurrection he rules over the ruins. When Jesus died for our sin and rose to life, he revealed God’s grace in the midst of the ruins of Sin and suffering. Because Christ triumphed, all Sin and suffering must bend to his will.

In his letter, then, Paul can encourage us to trust that God is at work even in suffering. Our God rules in love over ruins. He has shown his faithfulness to you by bringing you into participation in his ruling work through your baptism and through your continual reception of his grace in the hearing of his Word and the receiving of his body and blood.

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned that the worshippers at Coventry Cathedral examined the ruins of the Cathedral on the morning after the November 14 bombing in 1940. I told you that they considered two options, walking away from the ruins in despair, or sweeping up the ruins and building a new church at the same location. Some of you may know already that the worshippers chose neither of those two options. Instead, they went down a third path. They looked at the ruins and chose a path that held suffering and glory together in an attitude of hope, just as Paul presents for us. They built a new cathedral—but they left the ruins as a reminder of real suffering in a real world. So today Coventry Cathedral stands there in the midst of the ruins. Suffering and glory are woven together in hope. The Cathedral stands as a reminder that God's love rules over the ruins (Adapted from David Schmitt, *Man of God Strong to Serve*, page 47). We might also think of the Cathedral then as a visible representation of the truth of Paul's final words in chapter eight of Romans, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39). In other words, "Our God rules!" Amen.