Text: Romans 8:28. 1 - 14, 28, 31-39 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.

As we read the scripture, certain passages stand out like the sun touched mountain peaks of a landscape. These peaks of spiritual aspiration and devotion are the powerful and sublime affirmations of faith we find, such as the psalmist’s conviction, “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”, and Job’s statement of faith ” I know that my Redeemer liveth”. Among all of these, towers that magnificent affirmation of faith of Paul: “and we know that all things work together for good to them that love God to them that are called according to his purpose”. This is indeed a mighty statement, one which we must instinctively thrill to; but at the same time, whenever we reflect upon its meaning, we find it one of the hardest statements to understand or believe.

I

Do all things work together for good to them who love God? Do war, famine, disease, pestilence, murder work together for good? Do hate, treachery, deceit, lust, earthquake, storm and flood work together for good, even to them that love God? To argue that we learn peace through warfare, that we gain in knowledge as the evils of disease and pestilence force us to control them, seems merely skillful casuistry. The poet may be impressed with a beautiful flower that can spring up from filth, but most of us see that the spawn of evil things is still evil, that no matter how broad our perspective may be, how inclusive our view, and how strong our faith, all things do not work together for good.

There is always the temptation to view the world with rose tinted glasses from the security of the easy chair and the long-range point of view. Leibniz yielded to this temptation when he surveyed the world, and, like Jehovah, found it very good. He then proposed his theory that “This is the best of all possible worlds” to a world thirsty for Pollyanna philosophy. But Voltaire spoiled the fun by writing Candide, in which he showed the theme against the background of a series of natural and man-made calamities. There is always the tendency to gloss over the harsher aspects of life and develop the false optimism of the romanticist and the idealist. It was not so long ago that we were saying, “Every day in every way we’re getting better and better”.

This, however, cannot be the spirit of a man like Paul. He was no ivy tower idealist. His faith was no false optimism, because he forged it in the fire of bitter experience and vicissitude. He was well aware of the evils in the world and the need for combatting them. How then are we to understand this optimism of Paul which asserts so strongly and strangely “all things work together for good to them that love God”.

When we go back to the original texts, we find that this is not what Paul really said. The problem of translation is troublesome because the most trustworthy texts are almost equally divided on
two variant readings. There is the further difficulty, also, of not knowing exactly what the subject of the verb is, whether it is “all things” or “God”. The most faithful reading, which best fits the context, however, is this: ” We know that in all things God works with those who love him to bring about what is good”. We still have a powerful affirmation of faith, but the unconvincing optimism so unfitting in Paul is gone. Instead of believing that all things somehow worked together for good, we know that God in all things works with those who love him to bring about what is good.

II

If we cannot believe that the bestiality of man’s inhumanity to man, that the evils in life, work together for good, we can affirm with Paul that God is working with those who love Him for the good, whatever their task, wherever they may be, whether they ” take the wings of the morning or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea”. God is no fair weather friend who deserts us as the storm clouds roll up from the horizon. He is ever with us to lend a sustaining hand in all things, and with His help we are empowered to surmount our difficulties and bring about what is good.

[Browning]

When shadows come into our lives, we are inclined to fear that God has deserted us, but He is working out His purposes in the darkness as well as the light, working with us in all things. Why should we expect life to be all sweetness and light, anyway? If it were not for the shadows in the painting, the highlights would not be seen. If you did not know how to weep, you could not laugh. The magnificent chord of resolution in the symphony would be impossible without a dissonance preceding it. And did it never strike you as strange that when we play a game, and the sport is too easy, we invent rules to make it harder? God’s power is at work in all things, (working with those who love him to bring about what is good).

It is hard for us to realize this when we are faced by a sea of troubles. But it is not the evils we meet which determine whether our lives be good or not; rather it is the attitude we assume toward these evils. Paul was forever beset with hardships and trials, but because he loved God, God worked with him even in these things, to bring about what is good. And Paul, so empowered, spread the message of Jesus throughout Roman world. Paul Bunyan spent 12 long and lonely years in a moldy cell in punishment for a crime which he did not commit. But with God’s help, even in this evil, he produced that great book Pilgrim’s Progress during these years. We can have faith that God is working with us in all things to bring about what is good. His purpose never changes, and we can never escape (drift away from) His Spirit.

III

The significant phrase in this great affirmation of Paul’s faith is that God works with those who love him. Paul does not say that God protects those who love Him, or that He brings about what is good through His own efforts, while we sit back and enjoy the benefit. This faith implies an obligation on our part to work with God, if we expect what is good. We must become co-workers with God, if He is to help us. [love of God? illustration of children?]
Man has the privilege of working with God and His purpose or against Him. It is “up to us” to decide how we are to live. We have the potentialities to do much good or evil depending on the vision before us. We have ample opportunity to view today what happens when we fail to work with God. Because we ignored God entrusted to our own powers that were so skillful in making new tools, and toys, and guns, like little children who play with matches we have set the world on fire. When we ignore the will of God, we do not destroy it. When we fail to work with Him we find that we destroy ourselves, not His law. We have come to the point where we must learn to work with God; we must become co-workers with God: do what He requires, if we expect Him to bring about what is good.

We must attune our actions to the will of God and not make the mistake of bending God’s will to our own. We cannot tell God what to do. The world’s history is spotted with crimes committed in the name of religion. The Inquisition was defended as the will of God, and pious churchmen found Biblical authority for witch-burning. The tendency is all too great to assume that God is with us, whatever we do, as if He were a benign genie under our control. The story is told that during the dark days of the Civil War, a friend of Lincoln sought to cheer him by saying, “Anyway, Mr. President, we know God is on our side”. And Lincoln answered; “That is not the question; it is my fervent hope and constant prayer that we are on God’s side.” This is the attitude we must acquire, for only as we become co-workers with God, and love and do His will, will He bring about what is good.

Fosdick once said, “We cannot enjoy the fruits of the Kingdom of God, unless we have the roots of it”. We cannot expect God to work with us in all things for the good, unless we have in our hearts a single-minded love and devotion to Him. We cannot love worldly power and domination and live together in peace; we cannot follow selfishness and greed and expect the world to be prosperous; we cannot ignore of the rights and interests of others and expect our own to be undisturbed. We must work with God, through our love for Him, cooperate with His will, and He will work with us to bring about what is good.

We may not be able to see the good which lies ahead, because we cannot fathom the will of God. But like the tiny worm that weaves a chamber for the winged creature he has never seen but knows he is to be, so man works out a destiny he cannot understand, but knows by some Intelligence is good. Thus, beyond the vision of bloody war and ravaged earth, we catch a dreaming glimpse of peace, and know that, “In all things God works with those who love Him to bring about what is good”.

Poem

This is a good sermon.

It is fresh and, I believe, accurate in its exegesis.

It is comforting without being sentimental,

It is realistic.
The thought is worthy and the style attractive.
Quotations are lofty and effective.
The outline is logical: The sermon has unity and continuity.
Avoid “up to” - such expressions in this sermon are like warts on the face of a Madonna.
I like your picturesque style etc. - but you could use more illustrations and toward conclusion try for a climax and more effective appeal or challenge