



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Suffering

Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

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Considering the three lectionary readings today, I want to start to address the subject of suffering. I put it like that because it is too large a subject for a short sermon.

Oswald Chambers wrote,

Suffering is the heritage of the bad, of the penitent, and of the Son of God. Each one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified. By these signs we know the widespread heritage of suffering.¹

Should God the Son be Protected?

Consider the situation, God the Son has taken on a human body – he is truly God and truly man. The salvation of the human race depends on him. Is he going to be kept safe? Surely any of us would expect the answer to be that God would cocoon him in safety and protect him from all possibility of danger. Yet here we are, the baby is perhaps 3 – 20 months old, the wise men have visited and murder is almost at the door!

The Character of Herod

King Herod the Great was not racially a Jew but from Idumea (formerly called Edom) to the south of Judea. As such he was not well-regarded by the Jewish leaders. His decisions showed only limited concern for Jewish sensitivities. There was continual unrest under his rule making him suspicious of plots to revolt. Because of his background he would be concerned about the higher claim of a truly Jewish claimant to the throne.

In addition, he was paranoid. He killed 7 of his own family because he suspected they were plotting against him. Between 35-28BC, he had his brother-in-law drowned in case he was proclaimed king, his second wife and her mother executed for treason, and another brother-in-law for conspiracy. That wife was only the second of ten wives, but in 7BC, he had his two sons by her executed, and in 4BC merely 5 days before he died he executed his heir. However, his general cruelty was far more extensive such that the deaths of about twenty boys in Bethlehem (for that is the number estimated by scholars) would not even register on the scale of his public wrongdoing.

¹ *Christian Discipline* quoted at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com>

When he was dying, he feared that no one would grieve over his dying, so he commanded all the principal men of the country to assemble on pain of death. He then had them held captive and gave orders that they were to be killed when he died, so that the nation would grieve. If that were not enough, he gave orders for one member of every family to be killed for the same reason. Happily, his heirs did not enact his orders.²

So we can understand that the news that wise men had seen some mysterious event in the sky would terrify him. He asked when they saw the star and silkily ordered them to tell him when they found the child “.. so I too may worship him.” I remember hearing Stu Duval read that lesson in a Carol service a few years ago in the chapel. He was reading the text not dramatizing it, yet when he said those words, the hair went up on the back of my neck as the sinister intent came through.

The wise men were warned in a dream to return home without reporting to Herod and similarly Joseph was warned to get out of Bethlehem and flee to safety in Egypt. Given Herod’s reputation, I am sure Joseph needed little encouragement.

Dreams

Dreams figure largely in this account. Joseph is guided by dreams that Mary’s child is conceived of the Holy Spirit and he should marry her. The Magi are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Joseph is sent to Egypt again by an angel appearing in a dream to him. Then he is called back to Israel the same way and finally directed to Nazareth in yet another dream.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t seem to have significant dreams. Some people do. I think we need to be careful about mistaking too much cheese the night before for guidance, but it is clear that in Joseph’s case, this was the preferred way by which God guided him. So what can we say? We should not dismiss the possibility that God would speak to us through dreams but note also these dreams were apparently very clear – not the confused ideas of a normal dream.

Herod was denied the exact identity of the child, so he resorted to wholesale slaughter to be sure of killing any who might be the future king.

Suffering

What strikes me about these three passages is that suffering is involved in all of them. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were not spared the fear of a deranged king’s violence. They had to flee to Egypt for safety until that threat had literally died. Through his adult life, Jesus suffered rejection and threats. The debates in John 5-10 are legal arguments in which the Jewish leaders are trying to kill him. He avoided Jerusalem at times because of the determination they have to kill him but then went up incognito³. Finally, of course, he goes openly and suffers at their hands.

In the flight to Egypt and the return to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary went through difficult and frightening circumstances. It was certainly not comfortable or according to their own preferences, but what God did do was give them the necessary guidance to keep them safe.

We do suffer in this life. It is the result of living in a fallen world. Because of mankind’s rebellion against God, the good original creation is thrown out of kilter. Our race is affected with illness and death; the whole creation groans as it too is affected by this distortion of the divine order.

As Christians we are in the midst of a spiritual battle. When you are in a battle there are casualties. Jesus has won the victory but the Kingdom of God is already here yet fully established – the famous “now and not yet.” So we see some victories and some areas where victory is not yet established. Yet the final outcome is known – Jesus is Lord and has already conquered evil.

² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17:174ff

³ John 7:1-10;

Isaiah 63 – He too was distressed

In the Isaiah passage, a significant statement is made:

In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.⁴

In their distress, he too was distressed. When you are going through tough times, know that God remains with you. He is distressed with you in your distress. He is not unfeeling and uncaring. But in his love and mercy he walks with you and lifts you and carries you. It may not feel like it, but it is the promise of scripture. It is this concept that Mary Stevenson put into her reflection, *Footprints*:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.

Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there were one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you."⁵

Suffering not Punishment

We should not think then that suffering shows that we are out of God's favour. It may be just the opposite.

Hebrews 2 tells us that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. That needs some explanation.

One of my commentaries, by Guthrie, says that suffering in Hebrews refers not to pain generally but to the suffering of death.⁶

The word perfected means completed. It does not imply for Jesus that he was at some stage imperfect as in sinful. Guthrie, again, says,

In Jewish literature the idea of perfection is applied at times to death as the completion or seal of life. Perfection in *Hebrews* has to do with fully completing the course, making it to the end of God's plan.⁷

Thus Jesus being "made perfect through suffering" refers to his completing his mission of death on the cross.

For Jesus, suffering was part of representing us as our High Priest. His testing and coming through it uncompromised not only purchased our salvation but also allows him to support us in our trials.

Development through Suffering

Romans 5:2b-5 And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings [tribulations], because we know that suffering [tribulation] produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.⁸

There is good to be worked through the tribulations or pressures we face. Paul says they produce perseverance and hence character and hope.

⁴ Isaiah 63:9

⁵ © 1984 Mary Stevenson, from original 1936 text.

⁶ "'Suffering' refers not to pain generally but to the suffering of death (2:9, 14-15), a recurring theme in Hebrews (5:7-10; 9:26-28; 12:1-3)" – Guthrie G.H., 1998, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids; p.107

⁷ Ibid p.108.

⁸ Romans 5:2b-5 The word translated suffering in the NIV is better "pressure" or "tribulation." Friberg's Greek Lexicon.

However, it is worth noting that the New Testament uses the word “suffering” in the context of persecution and violence not about sickness. In English we use the word in both settings, but the verb “suffer” in Greek, *πασχω*, is not used in the context of sickness. That means, we tend incorrectly to apply scriptures about persecution to our sicknesses.

Certainly, sickness may develop character. So also may another negative things in our lives which we don't like, through God's grace, but the scriptures are not talking about sickness when we read of “carrying our cross.”

So when we face trials and temptations as part of following Jesus, we can turn to him for support. He has gone ahead of us. He has faced temptation and triumphed. He has been tested and not failed. He is our High Priest who presents our needs to the Father. He understands and he prays for us.

Another way of thinking about enduring through suffering is four P's.

Perseverance: We need perseverance. “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life.” James 1:12

Purpose: We need to have purpose in life. Then we can push through difficulties more readily.

Perspective: We need perspective, to see God at work in and over the events against which we battle.

Promise: And we have the promise of a reward: that crown of life which James promises.

Perseverance, purpose, perspective and promise.