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Sermon

The Suffering and Comfort of the Son of God

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

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As I considered the three readings today, suffering emerged as a common theme:

- God being with his people Israel through their suffering;
- the Holy Family suffering persecution and fleeing as refugees;
- the suffering to death of Jesus to save us all.

In each case it is the chosen of God who suffer. We should not think that suffering shows that we are being punished. In fact, the opposite – it is more likely opposition from the world to those who are endeavouring to follow God's ways.

Jesus scotched the idea that provision in life is related to our favour with God when he said in the Sermon on the Mount,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Mt 5:44-45)

He is saying that God is merciful and gracious to those who are unrighteous as well as the righteous and provides for all people.

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 in the gospel account: God the eternal Son has taken a human body – 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

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

that God would cocoon him in safety and protect him from all possibility of danger. Yet here they are, the baby is perhaps 3 – 20 months old, the wise men have visited and murder is almost at the door!

The ruler, King Herod the Great, was not a Jew but from Edom to the south of Judea. There was continual unrest under his rule making him suspicious of plots to revolt. Because of this background he would be concerned about the Jewish claim to the throne. In addition, he was paranoid. He killed seven of his own family because he suspected they were plotting against him.

So we can understand that the news of “one born to be king of the Jews” would terrify him.

The wise men were warned in a dream not to report back to Herod and similarly Joseph was warned to get out of Bethlehem and flee to safety in Egypt. Given Herod’s reputation, I’m sure Joseph needed little encouragement.

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. In that flight, the later return to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary went through difficult and frightening circumstances. It was certainly not comfortable or as they wished, but what God did 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.

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: the Kingdom of God is already here yet not fully established. 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.

Hebrews 2

That brings us to the reading from Hebrews 2. The writer is explaining the importance of the incarnation to his Jewish readers.

Last week, on Christmas Day, we read the first 14 verses of the gospel of John. There John told us that God the Son is God, that he had always existed, and created everything that exists. At a point in time, he became a human being. He was rejected by many but to those who did receive him, he gave the power to become children of God.

In Hebrews 2:10, the author starts with the shocking statement that it was fitting that God should make Christ perfect through suffering in bringing many sons to glory.²

That sounds shocking to us because it sounds cruel but that is just because we don’t understand what is meant. It was shocking to the Jews because the idea of God becoming a man was outrageous, let alone suffering and dying.

Let’s unpack it a little. In this context, suffering does not refer to pain generally but to the suffering of death.³ That is the context of the passage and what is being referred to throughout this section.

The word perfected means completed. It does not imply for Jesus that he was at some stage imperfect as in sinful. Dr George Guthrie, commenting on this passage, 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.

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² Hebb 2:10

³ “‘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

⁴ Ibid p.108.

Thus Jesus being “made perfect through suffering” refers to his completing his mission of rescue by dying on the cross.

I said this passage tells us the why of the incarnation – why God needed to become human. Verse 17 sums up the reason:

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

There are two reasons there: (a) to be a merciful high priest and (b) to make atonement for the sins of the people.

a. To be a merciful high priest.

The Jewish high priest was the intermediary between men and God. To fulfil that role perfectly, Jesus had to be God to represent God and he had to be a man to represent humanity. It took the God-man, truly God and truly man to fulfil that role. As he has experienced temptation and suffering, he can understand our struggles and sympathise with our weaknesses.

b. His mission was to be saviour.

To save us he had to be a human too. He had to be successful where we had failed under the same conditions. To free us from sin, he had to resist temptation as a man, he had to offer himself as a pure sacrifice and he had to die on our behalf.

Let’s go back to vv14 & 15 as we examine this:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

To be able to break the power of death over humanity, he had to share in our humanity. The penalty of sin is death – for us to be freed from the penalty of our sin, a sinless one had to die in our place. To break the power of death over us, he had to experience death himself and then show he had broken its power by rising again as he did on the third day.

Now God cannot die, but a human can. So God the Son had to become a man to be able to offer himself in our place to atone for sin and set us free.

As an aside, a word of explanation about the devil’s role here. The writer says he has the power of death.

We must always interpret scripture in the light of scripture. Elsewhere we read that it is God who has the power of life and death: in Deut 32:39, “I kill and I make alive.” In Revelation 1:18, Christ holds “the keys of Hades and of Death.” The way I understand this is: it is true that God is the one who has the power of life and death. Only he can create life and he determines the number of our days (Ps 90:10-12).

The devil is said to have the power of death not because he can kill and destroy people at will but because he first introduced sin which brought death into the world, he was a murderer from the beginning. To this day, he tempts us to sin and accuses us of sin. He terrifies people with the prospect of death.

But the good news in these verses is that Jesus has broken his power. Jesus has shown he is more powerful than death. As we trust him, He has rescued us from the consequences of our sin.

The Bible says here that Jesus has destroyed the devil or we could translate it as, deprived the Devil of force, influence and power. We don’t have to fear death, because Jesus has conquered death and will take us into life.

In short this passage is saying is that Jesus the creator has purchased our freedom so we don’t need to be afraid of death anymore.

To be the great high priest, to make atonement for our sins, for both these reasons he needed to become truly human. The incarnation was essential and the suffering of death was essential.

Isaiah 63 – He too was distressed

In the Isaiah passage, a significant statement is made:

In all their distress God 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.⁵

In their distress, he too was distressed. When you are going through tough times, know that God remains with you. He is distressed alongside 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."⁶

Whatever you face now or in the future, you can courage and comfort from the fact that God promises to go through it with you. Jesus said, "I am with always even to the end of the age." "He will never, never, never fail us or forsake us."⁷

Finally, a New Year thought.

We have been talking of footprints. There is a strange footprint in the chapel. If you look up on the ceiling, there is a clear print of a large foot in the varnish. It must have been made before the boards were put up there in 1917, very nearly 100 years ago. The builder was Mr Woods assisted by Mr Soden. Presumably it is the print of one of those men. They are long gone but their work in building the chapel remains and the footprint of one of them is accidentally preserved.

Today is the start of a new year – what footprint will your life leave here? How will family, friends, church and community be affected by your life?

Rather than worry about diets, etc, why not give some thought to the footprint you leave in other people's lives and what you want that to be?

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⁵ Isaiah 63:9

⁶ © 1984 Mary Stevenson, from original 1936 text.

⁷ Heb 13:5