



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Erebus Memorial Service

28th November 2019

© 2019 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Thanksgiving out of suffering

We sang the hymn— *Now Thank We All our God* — these are not glib words. It was written by Martin Rinkart, a Lutheran minister, in the besieged city of Eilenburg during the Thirty Years' War.

Famine and plague were rampant. 800 homes were destroyed, and the people began to perish. There was a tremendous strain on the pastors, who had to conduct dozens of funerals daily. Finally, the pastors, too, succumbed, and Rinkart was the only one left—taking 50 funerals a day.

When the Swedes demanded a huge ransom, Rinkart left the safety of the walls to plead for mercy. The Swedish commander, impressed by his faith and courage, lowered his demands. Soon afterward, the Thirty Years' War ended, and Rinkart wrote this hymn for a grand celebration service. It is a testament to his faith that, after such misery, he was able to write a hymn of abiding trust and gratitude toward God.

Not earned

When disasters occur we are quick to assume there must be a moral reason. We may think they are being punished and if we think well of the person involved we say it is not fair. In Jesus' time there had been a disaster when a building collapsed and killed some people. He specifically stated that they were not worse than anyone else around – it just happened.

However, God is with us in suffering. Let me read some portions of Isaiah 42 & 43:

This is what God the LORD says--he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

These are promises from God to his people. He offers to take us by the hand and lead us through life.

Are these promises empty? No - He promises to go with us **through** the struggles of life. We humans, as a race – at the broadest level, have brought suffering, violence and destruction into the world through our choices to rebel against God. God's great gift to humanity is free will, so He does not wave a magic wand to make everything perfect. Rather he bears the consequences himself in Christ. He walks with us through the tough times: – “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”

In the midst of it all. God walks with us and offers his strong right hand to support us.

We just heard from Is 41:10 “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

There are a surprisingly large number of places where he repeats this offer of taking our hand: Here are a two more of many:

Isaiah 41:13 For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

Psalms 139:9-10 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Hebrews 13:5 I will never, never give you up; I will never, never, never abandon you.

There is a story of a little boy walking with his grandfather. When they had gone a way into the bush, the grandfather stopped and asked his grandson, “Do you know where we are?”

“No, Grandpa,” said the little boy.

“Do you know where we are going?”

“No, Grandpa,” piped the little boy.

“Well then you're lost aren't you?,” said the old man.

“No, Grandpa - I'm not lost; I'm with you.”

That's how it is with God and us. He walks through life with us and as we stay close we are not lost because he knows where we are and he is the way.

We can be assured that he knows what it is to suffer. Jesus voluntarily headed towards his death on the cross. It was a brutal form of execution and he is recorded several times in the months beforehand saying that he would be flogged and crucified. He knew what he was heading towards and he did it for us to rescue us from judgement.

The prophet Isaiah described his suffering:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.¹

Jesus knows what extreme physical suffering is like.

¹ Isaiah 53:3-5

God sees every detail of our lives and he knows every thought: he is constantly aware of human suffering. And there has been great suffering from that fateful flight of 28th Nov 1979:

- There was the terrible accident and loss of life for those on board, both passengers and crew.
- There has been the long-term grief, anger and loss for those who lost family or friends.
- There has been the anguish, guilt and self-recrimination for those involved in technical errors.
- There has been the trauma of the several hundred New Zealanders and 40 US citizens who were involved in “the extremely difficult and very unpleasant, hazardous, and extreme circumstances associated with the body recovery, crash investigation and victim identification phases of Operation Overdue’.
- There has been the tension, anxiety, anger and despair associated with the inquests, inquiries and appeals.

Time heals slowly that is unless we refuse and cling to our hurts and judgements. With respect, may I suggest that we need to let go of any remaining offence or bitterness? We may feel they should not get away with it. We may feel that our love for those we lost demands that we hold people to account. In fact, that bitterness and those demands poison us as we hold onto them. We need to choose to let go and forgive.

Martin Rinkart experienced the grief of war. Can we pray, with him, that God would:

.... keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
to free us from all ills in this world in the next.