

GOD

and all our troubles

Sunday 10 October 2021

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Corinthians 1:3-7: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...* So, this month, as we anticipate a more familiar kind of life returning, let's talk about all our troubles and reflect on where is the God of all comfort in the midst of them.

'*In all our troubles*' were words wrapped in a specific ancient context for Paul and his churches. The setting today has changed but the impact has not. Our troubles may come in different wrapping but they are still none the less sources of anxiety, stress, heartache. Before we come to our passage, by way of introduction I want to tell you a story about the famous Orthopaedic Surgeon, Paul Brandt, who worked and lived for many years with those who had leprosy. Leprosy has been around since biblical times and untreated is such a terrible disease both physically and socially. At the start of his book called 'The Gift of Pain', he tells harrowing, grotesque stories of people who were indifferent to and insensitive to pain. Tanya, a little 4-year-old who would bite the tops of her fingers off in order to draw pictures in blood and elicit a response from others. Another man would put his hands straight into the fire when cooking; and another would drive stones and twigs into the marrow of exposed bones in his feet. Why? They lacked a working nervous system that warned them of physical danger.

Brandt tells the story of a time when he fell terribly ill on the way home from New York to London. When he arrived in London at the home of his Aunt, he tells of his complete exhaustion from what had been a voyage wracked with fever, and he discovered when he took off his shoes to get into bed that he could not feel his foot. Immediately he thought it had finally happened, he had contracted the disease he had been treating others for so long, confident he would never be infected by it. That sleepless night he thought about the gradual loss of sensation that would work through his whole body: his hands would be useless for surgery, the ending of his career, the impact on other workers, the prejudice that would

attract and the kind of painless death that would eventually meet him – and he was utterly terrified at the prospect of a painless life.

The next morning he awoke and, as if treating one of his patients in India, he took a needle and stabbed himself in the leg probing for how far the disease had spread – only to experience the glorious sensation of pain. He realised that he had damaged the nerves in his foot when he passed out on his horrendous journey home but it was not, after all, leprosy. But he says that night was the defining moment in his life, to see a glimpse of a world without pain, a world of numbness. He said, "thank God for pain," and he dedicated much of the rest of his life to treating those who lived without the physical sensation of pain.

My point of this story is not that pain is great, or to be thankful for it – that's not biblical at all. But these stories remind me two things:

Pain has a place – that life without pain or trouble actually seems out of place. Pain has a place – the experience of pain is real and universal. It as Brand says, "flows like lava beneath the crust of daily life". When John, in Revelation chapter 21, describes a new heaven and earth he specifically says that Jesus will "*wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*"

Death, mourning, crying or pain is the old order and to some extent that's our address. And so trouble is our real and common experience. The old order of things is passing away but not yet fully passed away, and the new order of things is yet still to fully come.

Secondly, it got me thinking that at some level, **pain has a purpose** – and that as Brandt realised, "The health of the body depends largely on its attentiveness to the pain network." Pain is telling us something: danger, something is not right, we need to be sensitive to what is happening to us and around us, that some things are to be avoided and some things are to be embraced. That our pain is there for a purpose, and so often we try and suffer in silence or dismiss it or numb it or avoid it in some unhealthy way. And as Christians we add another whole layer of complexity to our situation – we spiritualise it, demonise it, feel guilty about it, or think we lack faith – and in doing so might just end up feeling worse.

The Bible will have none of it. The Bible pulls no punches when it comes to the reality of pain and all our troubles. People in pain are on every page of the Old Testament and New Testament. There is a whole genre of literature called 'lament'. The Psalms are filled with people processing their feelings of suffering and trouble and trauma in life, and the grief that comes from it – it might be physical, but it also might be relational, emotional, mental, social, existential. 'All our troubles' is a good term because there are so many. And God gives us permission to feel it, and to see our pain, in whatever form has a place and a

purpose. I encourage you to listen last weeks devotional from Keiran Shanahan as it speaks directly into this.

How are you? Really? I'm a mixed bag at the moment... What "flows like lava beneath the crust of daily life"? What are you secretly lamenting? Cancelled weddings, missed funerals, losing precious time with grandkids, or parents in nursing homes, or holidays, milestones, rites of passage, loss of community, loss of employment and just the heightened sense of a world in chaos on so many fronts. It's ok to be mad, sad. To avoid grief and the negative emotions is spiritually unhealthy because, like the poor residents of the Canary Islands, lava has a way of coming to the surface in destructive ways. So, to not grieve or lament or acknowledge that you are not ok is a problem - as is to grieve without hope is also a problem.

Now a question that usually flows from all our troubles is, "But where is God...in all our troubles?" That core objection for many is that if God is good and powerful then why does He allow so much pain, trouble and trauma to go on unabated. He is either distant, not loving, not powerful or, for the atheist, not there. But if you take away God, you don't make the problem of pain better, you make it worse: "If there is no God, then evil and suffering and violence are perfectly natural." There is no right and wrong - there is just what is and therefore what is good and what is evil is totally subjective. Removing God from the explanation doesn't make it better. So if God is in the equation, what is God doing in all our trouble?

Let's turn to our passage today from John 11 - a chapter dedicated to the events surrounding the death of Lazarus.

Bethany is a town just a few kilometres outside Jerusalem. And in this town live Martha, Mary and their brother, Lazarus - all of whom John points out, Jesus loved. Lazarus is very ill and the women send word for Jesus to come and heal him. Time is running out and Jesus is not coming. They are anxiously waiting, looking out for Him on the road, hoping and waiting some more, and hoping He will arrive soon and then... It's too late. Lazarus dies.

If you have lost someone you love, perhaps you know both the agony of death and the disappointment of not seeing God arrive in time to step in and fix it. Imagine how they felt, especially if they know that Jesus has waited several more days before coming. And then He arrives, and did you notice both Martha then Mary asks the same question: "*If only you had been here...*" A polite way of saying, "Where were you when we needed you?!" It is normal to question, "Where is God in our trouble? Where were you when I needed you?" Have you ever felt confused: "God couldn't you act faster? It seems like you are too late! Is this really the way it has to be?" There are times when we have no idea what God is doing, and we just have to say, "I don't know..." But this passage speaks to me of three things perhaps we can know:

God is waiting. There are times when God is waiting. Jesus waits a few days in John 11. And our response is always, "no, now! Jesus if only you had been here!" We don't understand the 'why' or the 'when' of God and our questions are sometimes met with silence. Why does Jesus let them mourn when He had the power to just avoid the funeral? Why wait? John 11:6 says, "*So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days*"; and in verse 15 Jesus says, "*Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.*"

I've noticed this is something Jesus does on several occasions:

- a desperate Syro-Phoenician mother whose daughter was mentally sick - Jesus first appears reluctant to heal...
- 10 lepers who have to go and wash then go and show themselves to the priest...
- A crowd that Jesus says to the disciples to feed...
- A persistent widow crying out for justice, and at the end of the story her persistence is rewarded and Jesus asks when He returns will the son find faith.

In all these instances, there is a sense that the story is about more than a healing or a miracle. It's like Jesus' real agenda is drawing out faith in people. Jesus says, "*I'm glad I was not there so you may believe.*" What if God is waiting to see belief and faith in His disciples, in Mary and Martha, in the crowd. I think we all want to experience the astonishment and relief of God breaking into our circumstances and fixing things - but I just wonder whether the real win is faith and trust, regardless of the outcome? Every miracle or healing is temporary, but faith, hope and love remain eternal. I suspect that God prioritises *faith in* all troubles, over *fixing* all our troubles. Has your faith taken a beating at some stage? I know mine has. And I think we can both admit that disappointment to God and then, not turn away, but turn back again and let God draw you back to faith.

But secondly we see **God is weeping.** Notice how different Jesus' responses are to Mary and Martha. To Martha, Jesus seems to have a fairly frank conversation - Martha needed clarity around His identity, His power to raise, a challenge to trust. Mary asks the same question but Mary needed a different response: "*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"*" (John 6:33-36)

Jesus wept. Meditate on those two words...

Why is Jesus weeping? He already knows that Lazarus won't die, that He has the power to do something about it. So why not come in with, "Mary its ok. I'm going to fix this." So why weep? Because His power and His truth is an expression of His divine love - and divine love doesn't refuse to enter into the grief and the pain. That's where you find love, right in the

middle of all our trouble, in the weeping. Jesus, in His perfect humanity and divinity, weeps. Love enters into the grief - it doesn't stand aloof. There is deep identification with our suffering and trouble - when God sees the state of our brokenness, He is not distant; He is with you. Read Psalm 34 this week. Verse 18 says, "*The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*"

You are follower of Jesus, housed in a body, with a mind and emotions - and God cares about the whole package, not just about your spirit. Jesus is the most emotionally healthy person to ever live, and He is weeping. To grieve is not a sign of faithlessness or weakness, but of love. God doesn't avoid grief - in fact He makes Himself fully acquainted with it in all its forms. So don't avoid your own grief or those who are hurting.

So God is waiting, weeping - but lastly, **God is working.** Jesus here is not only offering empathy or consolation, He is revealing a far greater plan. "*Deeply moved in spirit and troubled*" gets a little lost in our translation. It's more than sadness; it has a tone of agitation, indignant, perhaps even angry - not at the women, not at the crowd, but at the scourge of sin and human brokenness and agony of humanity that knows death and needs resurrection.

Jesus is about to raise Lazarus but, more than that, He is initiating the plot to have Him killed and previewing His own resurrection, His victory over the finality of death, the hopelessness and lostness of the old order that knows death, mourning, crying and pain. Jesus is working here to reveal God's glorious response to trouble: "*I'm not a way to resurrection, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*" (John 11:25-26)

And Jesus knew that when raising Lazarus was causing His own death. To get him out of the grave, He had to go to the grave. We have a God so committed to ending suffering and death that He came into the world to personally end it. Only Christianity has a God that is willing to suffer Himself and alongside of us. Yes, He waits and we don't always understand, but He weeps with us as One fully acquainted with suffering; but more than that Jesus works for our healing, our resurrection, so that one day: "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" (Revelations 21:4) Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life, do you believe this?" That matters because that is the way we access this resurrection - believe in the One who can not only raise a dead man, but has power over death itself.

Everyone is putting their faith in something: we run to something in our troubles, find comfort in something. Well in all our troubles I pray that you run to the God of all comfort - the One who is calling out faith in you, the One weeping with you, and the One working to give you a real reason for hope.