

GOD ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE

(Lamentations 3.22-23, Romans 8.37-39)

"If you were accused of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?" I'm sure you have heard that before. I remember it as a slogan from the mid-eighties when I first became a follower of Jesus. It was usually used as a challenge to your witness to the outside non-believing world that we all inhabited, apart from a Sunday morning and a few evenings a week.

Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans was certainly written to a group of believers who would have had plenty of evidence piled up against them when they were accused. Paul's letter to the Roman Christians we believe was written in Corinth in 58 BC.

Less than ten years later the persecution and martyring of tens of thousands of Christians commenced under Nero in AD 67 continuing to AD 313 until the conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine.

Short extract of a commentary written at the time:

In the year 67, emperor Nero, the sixth emperor of Rome ordered that the city of Rome should be set on fire. While the imperial city was in flames, he went up to the tower of Macaenas, played upon his harp, sung the song of the burning of Troy, and openly declared that 'he wished the ruin of all things before his death.

This dreadful conflagration continued nine days; when Nero, finding that his conduct was greatly blamed, and a severe odium cast upon him, determined to lay the whole upon the Christians, at once to excuse himself, and have an opportunity of glutting his sight with new cruelties. This was the occasion of the first persecution; and the barbarities exercised on the Christians were such as even excited the commiseration of the Romans themselves.

Nero even refined upon cruelty, and contrived all manner of punishments for the Christians that the most infernal imagination could design. In particular, he had some sewed up in skins of wild beasts, and then worried by dogs until they expired; and others dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to axletrees, and set on fire in his gardens, in order to illuminate them (origin of Roman Candles!). This persecution was general throughout the whole Roman Empire; but it rather increased than diminished the spirit of Christianity.

The defining thing about these Christians was their refusal to bow down to anyone but the true God as revealed through their saviour Jesus Christ, and not the emperor or other pagan gods. This was the compelling evidence used against them.

In the 250 years from Nero to Constantine, some scholars reckon there were as many 7 million Christians in the Roman Empire of whom 2 million may have been martyred for their faith, (please don't quote me).

This gives us the background of why Paul was writing to a church that was growing rapidly from an initial set of converted Jewish believers that would become more inclusive of Gentile believers.

These believers had opposition coming around the corner in a massive and evil way and their faith would be tested and shaken to its core. Paul is writing to encourage them (and us) in all things and to give assurance that nothing can separate from God's love demonstrated through Jesus.

While our Romans reading is v38 and v39 I think we need just to go back to v31 of chapter 8 which sets the tone of the whole passage the verses 38/39 complete.

V31 and 32: What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us who is against us? God after all did not spare his own son: he gave him up for us all! How then will he not, with him, freely give all things to us?

In the light of suffering and times of testing we may question our faith and God's promises which are always easy to believe when life is hunky

dory but Paul is saying 'remember where you are spiritually, you have become believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have been declared in the right because of this. If God did all this for you then before you even knew of him why will he give up on you now.'

Paul tells us Jesus intercedes to father even now on our behalf so who can separate from his love?

In verse 38 a number of contenders appear that we might be tempted to try and separate us from God's love. The old enemy Death separates man from man, as all of us here know, but God's promise of resurrection and the life of the age to come is not something that ends when we end our mortal life in the present age.

Life can throw up some wonderful and awful events which distract us from God but his promises remain constant if only we choose to fall on them.

Angels, obviously evil or bad angels and evil powers, will try and separate us from the love of God through many forms, but we know that through Jesus' resurrection evil has been defeated and Gods promises remain valid.

Creatures, either real or imaginary, the height and depth of life's experience will try and undermine us, but God has the measure and power over them and they know it more than us.

In a post-modern world, it can be seen as being arrogant to claim that we are assured of our salvation ahead of judgement and we can have assurance now. Yes rulers, the future and powers, can and always will try to undermine and belittle God and his purposes.

When we say *God is for Us* it can sound very glib, armies can go to war claiming 'God is on our side', but these claims we speak of are being made by an apostle who has faced hardship, persecution, danger, death and ultimately will face execution at the hands of the Romans.

As Tom Wright points out, the claim that hope will not let us down can only be made as we share the sufferings of the messiah.

So how does our short reading from Lamentations chapter 3 fit in to this? Some scholars have ascribed Jeremiah as the author of this book written around 590 BC in what is called the Prophets section of the Old Testament but this is not conclusive.

Like the book of Job, Lamentations pictures a man of God walking around the rubble of Jerusalem after the Babylonian invasion and puzzling over the results of evil and suffering in the world.

However, while Job dealt with unexplained evil, possibly if it was Jeremiah he lamented a tragedy entirely of Jerusalem's making. The people of this once great city experienced the judgment of the holy God, and the results were devastating.

But at the heart of this book, at the centre of this lament over the effects of sin in the world, sit a few verses devoted to hope in the Lord. This statement of faith in chapter 3 standing strong in the midst of the surrounding darkness shines as a beacon to all those suffering under the consequences of their own sin and disobedience.

22-23 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Verse 25 goes on to say *The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him to the one who seeks him.*

In essence, this is a blurred foggy signpost of future hope to the truth that despite our feelings, circumstances and even our own sin (if that is relevant) God is for us and will never give up on us.

We talk of our God as a righteous which in many ways is *not* so much about his moral uprightness but his complete faithfulness to his

covenant both to Abraham and Israel and the wider world through the faithful messiah Jesus.

God proves his righteousness and commitment to these promises through Jesus death, resurrection and ascension.

The destruction of God's dwelling place with man can no longer happen, as it has been replaced (as Jesus said it would in 3 days) and God dwells not in a man-made building any more but through his Holy Spirit in those who choose to follow him. The Old Testament scrap of hope has been fulfilled and completed through the true messiah.

As Paul says if this same God (who raised Jesus to life ushering in the start of his new kingdom at the first Easter) is for us, who can be against us?