

GRACE FOR THE HEARTBROKEN

(Lamentations 3.13-26 and Luke 18.9-14)

Am I the only one who hesitates before switching on the news because it is so dreadful? So many people are in such desperate straights and are suffering great losses. Famine, war and atrocities seem to be everywhere. Our subject this morning is grace for the heartbroken and our whole world appears to be broken at the present.

At Easter the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke about the killing of the Coptic Christians in Egypt who live surrounded by bombs and terror. In our land we all know the grim grey moments of illness, suffering, guilt and failure, grief and death. There are no easy answers to this suffering, but hope is found in Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. - God's grace to us.

You do wonder if the world has always been like it is today. The book of Lamentations suggests it has. The book is short containing 4 poems of lament, probably written by Jeremiah - clearly a half empty glass man written after Jerusalem had been invaded and people forced out of their homes. 'How deserted lies the city. All the splendour has departed. All her people groan as they search for bread. Is it nothing to you who pass by? Is any suffering like my suffering?' It sounds familiar doesn't it?

Then in the middle of this gloom comes this glorious passage of hope. We know the words - we have just sung some of them. '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.' No matter how bad things are we can rise above them and look up to God.

A verse further on he writes, The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.'

God's love is for everyone to accept. It is freely given. God knows us, accepts us, forgives us and that is what matters. There is a lot about God's love in the Bible. Psalm 25 'All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful' and in Psalm 23 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear

no evil for you are with me'. In Isaiah 54 'My unfailing love for you shall not be shaken says the Lord who has compassion on you'.

God showed his great love by coming among us as Jesus -His gift to us who took up our infirmities and carried our diseases so we could unite with him and allow the Holy Spirit to work within us and change our heartache to joy. Jesus didn't come to stop or to explain suffering, nor to take it away; he came to fill it with his presence.

Jesus was fully human so he experienced heartbreak like us. Like the writer of Lamentations Jesus was living in an occupied country with all that involved. He was deeply upset by the desecration of the Temple and the gradual destruction of Jerusalem - how I have longed to gather you under my wings like a hen gathers her chickens. Jesus was rejected by his community and his family, mourned the death of his close friend was betrayed by another, denied by third and deserted by nearly all the rest. Finally we read how desolate he was in the Garden of Gethsemane facing a horrible death.

In Lamentations most of the heartache concerned was out of control of those concerned. Sometimes things like sudden death or accidents can happen to us. However much of our heartache is caused by our sin or other peoples sin. Our second reading is Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which sheds light on this.

These two individuals came to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray but really only the tax collector prayed. Tax collectors were at the bottom of the heap at the time of Jesus. They were employed by the Roman occupiers of the country so were regarded as traitors. They weren't paid so had to squeeze extra money from the taxpayers. They were extortionists and thieves who targeted the vulnerable - a sinner. He was also trapped. He wouldn't be able to get another job. How would he live? But he acknowledged his sin and begged mercy from God. Many don't. John Greenwood used to say that criminals at Holme House blamed everybody but themselves for their plight. Many can't face the consequences of their own or others sin and turn to drugs or drink. No wonder that groups like the 'Moses Project' and 'A Way Out' have their work cut out to share God's love to those on the margins. And it isn't just those on the edge of society that make excuses or blame somebody else for heartache.

It is lack of love for God and each other that causes most of the heartache in the world - breakdown of relationships between individuals, families, groups and tribes and between countries. Lack of love and inability to say sorry or to forgive.

Jesus came to enable us to deal with all our sadness and our sins and the sins of those that have hurt us. We need to accept help, accept God's grace and allow his Spirit to change us, whatever has caused our heartache.

Does this work - well it did for the early disciples. They changed from fearful locked away people to people unafraid of speaking out of facing torture and martyrdom.

A few years ago I was privileged to spend some time at Scargill House with a group of bishops from Uganda who were experiencing persecution from Amin who had already killed some of their families. They went back to certain death. Ask Brian from the Moses Project or those who run A Way Out.

Jesus talks about his peace. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

'Jesus said; 'Set your troubled hearts at rest and banish your fears', 'Be assured I am with you always to the end of time.' Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give. I am the bread of life. Take it and eat. This is my body broken for you.

There is a silence at the heart of heartache. Be still with God.

I will face this. I will accept its full impact, silently turning my gaze onto the crucified Christ, who is in the darkness with me. I am enfolded and held in the love of God who is both Love in Death and Love-Risen.

I spent time with an American who had been held in Sudan as a prisoner of a rebel army. Women evangelists followed the army and sang their message. Here is one of their songs.

*Let us give thanks to the Lord in the Day of Devastation
And in the day of contentment*

*Jesus has bound the world round
with the pure light of the word of the Father
When we beseech the Lord and unite our hearts and have hope
Then the Jok has no power
God has not forgotten us
Evil is departing and holiness is advancing
These are the things that shake the earth
Do not look back
We are the people who have received the light of Christ
Let us show forth the light of the Son of God.
Do what you are able to do
According to the gift which has been given you*

Mary Alueel Ngohgdit Garang, 1992