

Adversity

Prayer:

Dear Father, we are glad to know your presence today, and that you hear us and receive our prayers and our worship, because we come in the name of your Son.

So lead us in our time together, and build us up in our understanding of you. for we ask our prayers in the name of Jesus, The Christ. Amen.

First hymn: *by Anna L Waring 1823-1957 (T Penlan David Jenkins 1849-1915)*

- 1) In heavenly love abiding no change my heart shall fear,
and safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid,
but God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?
- 2) Wherever He may guide me no want shall turn me back,
my Shepherd is beside me, and nothing can i lack:
His wisdom ever waketh, His sight is never dim,
He knows the way He taketh and I will walk with Him.
- 3) Green pastures are before me which yet I have not seen,
bright skies will soon be o'er me where the dark clouds have been;
my hope I cannot measure, my path to life is free,
my Saviour has my treasure, and He will walk with me.

Reading:

- Psalm 6
- Hebrews 12:1-11

Intercessions:

Dear Father, we pray for your world, the world you so loved that you sent your Son that He might save us from our plight of our own choosing, and be freed up to be enabled to pray according to your will. We are conscious of many places that currently are the sites of horrific actions by warring mankind, unconscious mostly of their actions against your plan for peace in the world. We pray, as we often have, for Ukraine that those many there who believe in your Son may be faithful in praying to you, and that they will seek and receive your instructions to them, and be faithful to your will.

The Gaza war continues to rage with the many horrors which are common in all wars; we do not know how to pray but our prayers include those for true peace, with the awareness that true peace is unlikely until the Prince of Peace returns. And we include our own longing for that wonderful day to soon come.

Bless the leaders of our land; give them discernment and strength in their leadership. So in all things, may your will be done. For we pray our prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Second hymn: by John G Whittier 1807-92 (T Green Hill A Peace 1844-1912)

- 1) Who fathoms the eternal thought? Who talks of scheme and plan?
The Lord is God: He needeth not the poor device of man.
- 2) Here in the maddening maze of things, when tossed by storm and flood,
to one fixed ground my spirit clings; I know that God is good.
- 3) I know not what the future hath of marvel or surprise,
assured alone that life and death His mercy underlies.
- 4) And if my heart and flesh are weak to bear an untried pain,
the bruised reed He will not break, but strengthen and sustain.
- 5) I know not where His islands lift their fronded palms in air,
I only know I cannot drift beyond His love and care.

Message: "Adversity".

Our reading today is a strong word about how God disciplines his children because He loves us – He intends us to learn to endure hardship and discipline in order that we might become mature! That trumps our comfort always, because that panders to our desire for a comfortable life which can cause us to rest on our laurels. Paul writes a similar statement about the need to “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ” (2 Tim 2:4) and the need for an athlete to compete according to the rules (2 Tim 2:5)

James the Lord’s half-brother writes in the earliest book of the NT Canon:

“Count it all *joy* my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”. (James 1:2-4) (perfect here means *complete, mature*).

Now tribulation is an old word – from the [latin: *tribulum*] – which is a threshing instrument, a long pole with leather thongs attached to which is attached on the end a block of wood – to act as a flail, and to thresh out the heads of grain from the wheat! A loose translation could say "In this world you will be thumped!" But this tribulation would all be because of Him!

There are other forms of adversity that most of us will experience.

My experience as a surgeon over 40 years gave me a good view of people who had to face adversity of the *physical* sort – often when I had to give them bad news. Those I got to know best were those who had to hear the diagnosis and prognosis first from me. And I would follow them through, operate on them as required, and continue to follow them even if their surgery was not able to cure them. I watched their *faces* when I had to give them bad news, and what did I see?

Fear! I read it in their eyes. Every human being instinctively fears death. Only a revelation that transforms a person changes that. The letter to Hebrews talks about the One who assumed human nature “*that He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is,*

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the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage!" (Heb 2:14-15)

I cannot get some people's faces out of my memory.

One was a Mrs M. She attended carrying her Barium Meal study, which her Dr. had not said anything to her about! I put up the films on my Xray screens. They left no doubt in my mind! She had a classical cancer of the stomach – which used to be called "the captain of the men of death". (It was hard to cure.) "What is it Doctor?" She asked with a face full of apprehension. Now how do you say it gently? I told her it could only be one thing, as discreetly as I could. And then she asked the classical question: "*Why me!?*"

I have thought a lot about that question ever since. There is a lot in it.

For if what our school and university students are told these days is true, i.e. what many think is what modern science says, that we are all merely the result of chance events, over a long time, then the question would not be asked. "Why NOT me?" would have been even more logical. She said even more! "I have tried to help people...to do the right thing." She was angry!

I couldn't answer her question, of course.

The question contained a *theological statement!* This was what I heard her saying:

- this event did not just happen
- there is a plan and purpose in the cosmos
- Someone is in control
- that One has chosen this thing for me (or let it happen!)
- and I don't like it – I don't agree with the choice
- and I am lodging a protest

Can you see that? All those things in 2 words! Her face was tragic.

I never was able to engage with this sad woman. She curled up into herself, and I couldn't reach her.

I operated on her and did a conservative gastrectomy. That would stop her bleeding and vomiting. But indeed she was not curable. I can't now remember why – I think she had secondaries in the liver....in the days before good chemotherapy. But I continued to see her...but I could never break into her private world of horror, or assist her primal problem. She shut me out!

Pain sometimes reveals the same sort of thing. Pain is a wonderful thing! Did you know that? Why, you ask?

Did you know that without pain you cannot *survive*? There is a rare condition "congenital indifference to pain". These unfortunate children never live beyond young teenage. They destroy themselves. They wreck their joints. They burn themselves like lepers! Their fingers and toes fall off. They get sepsis, and keep injuring themselves. (They do have pain fibres – but when the stimulus reaches their brain they can't connect the dots. They don't feel it as pain. So they don't learn.) Pain is a wonderful educator. Mother says "Don't touch – it's

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hot"! The little child disobeys, of course, and then screams... with the pain. Its OK mother! They won't do it again. Now they know. They have learnt.

And pain is a metaphor, isn't it? ...for all suffering. Suffering in every realm teaches you!

And suffering seems to be a part of our lot – at some time in our lives.

Much of our suffering is avoidable. Lung cancer was once a very rare cancer; it became the commonest because humans smoked. Obesity is now a scourge of our western world, and produces diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis, but it is a lifestyle disease produced by over-eating. AIDS began as the "gay plague" – you didn't just catch it, you had to ask someone to give it to you. It still mostly comes from the pursuit of perverse life-style choices.

Now most suffering is actually man-made (self-inflicted wounds!) "Racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs are made by man." (C.S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain*). And famines are common in our world, but there has always been enough food in the world for every one; the main problem has been *distribution*, and who is in charge of that? Ghandi said "there is enough food in the world for our need, but not for our greed!" The greatest suffering anyway is probably not physical – anxiety and worry probably do more damage, certainly in the West. Many have great handicaps, but statistically it is the over-coming of handicaps which takes many people to the top of their field!

And Jesus said times would get tougher for his followers. He spoke of the kind of events that would occur before His return; wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, false teachers, and people falling away from the faith.

And Jesus said "most men's love will grow cold" (Matt 24:12), then he added "Lo I have told you beforehand". So we should not be surprised about the things we see in our world – we should expect them and read the signs.

I want to finish with a story of a patient called Jill. She came early in my days of surgical practice (1984). She was born the same year as I – so she was 45 years old. She was wife of an industrialist, had a B.Ed., was a lecturer in a CAE (later TAFE) in a science-based field, 4 lovely children (her words!) lived in a large house in a well-to-do suburb not far from the beach, loved her garden – and had an acre of it.) One might be inclined to say her whole life stretched out promisingly before her; that her cup of happiness was complete.

She came in on the arm of her father, having been referred by a Gastroenterologist from FMC. He had found tumours throughout the whole colon, some "metaplastic" some "neoplastic" on biopsy, multiple sessile adenomatous polyps of the sigmoid colon, and a large tumour of the rectum (Carcinoma on biopsy) and more. It was a disastrous finding! She was mildly anxious, which I thought thoroughly justified.

There was really *no good news*; her colonic mucosa was becoming cancerous! I thought my options were extremely limited. I could only offer her removal of her whole colonic mucosa – that meant total procto-colectomy and permanent L iliac ileostomy.

She accepted the plan without demurring – her father was a bit less accepting! A week later I performed the procedure at St Andrew's Hospital. She was 2 weeks in hospital.

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Jill held a wake for her colon! She invited all the nurses along. She was an interesting character. She learned all the lessons well from the Stomal Therapy Nurse, and coped well!

I then saw her regularly, a month later, then 3 monthly after that (which was normal for all my cancer patients in the first year!)

She gained weight and looked well, but on about her 5th visit she was not quite so well. Screens showed a slight rise in liver functions. By that time we had CT scans available, and a CT showed several likely metastases in the L lobe of the liver. All this time she was receiving treatment from an Oncologist. She was an intelligent woman and understood the significance her condition; she requested that I do no more tests. Then her husband abandoned her – he was far too busy and important to be bothered with a wife who wasn't well! I have seen it often enough – it is the husbands who leave mostly, not the wives.

I continued to see her, as I did with all my cancer patients, provided they wanted to see me. Most seemed to want to. One day she said "I have become a Christian." I asked "How did that happen?" She didn't know, and couldn't tell me. But I have seen it *not a few times*, mostly in people who were not curable! It is as if the patient facing their end, stops playing games, and faces the truth which possibly they had known since childhood – most children in the days of our youth had heard Bible stories and the Christian message, but often it was put on "cold storage"! These truths in Australia had often been heard, but it didn't go any further.

I got to know Jill better; we now had the Christian faith in common and enjoyed talking to each other, and exchanging ideas. We swapped books, and discussed them. She seemed to grow rapidly in her understanding – she rapidly understood things I had taken years to learn. We laughed a lot! We prayed together. My times with her ran over the normal appointment length (I was censured by my secretary!) I stopped "treating" her. She had asked "Do you think the 5FU is doing anything?" I said "I doubt it." So she said "Let's forget it!" I agreed. I saw her more often, rather than less; I stopped charging her – after all there is no Medicare number for prayer. We were just 2 people meeting. One day she looked jaundiced – awful really! I didn't mean to ask it – it just slipped out – "How are you?" (It's a normal greeting isn't it? You don't say that to people who look very ill, do you?) But she answered, and the words stuck in my mind! "Wonderful – *every day is like a new adventure!*"

(How about that? This is from someone who was dying!)

She was failing, so I suggested a hospice – there was one not far from where I lived, in Kalyra, Belair. She went there and I visited her instead. We both valued and enjoyed these times.

And there she died after some weeks, with words of praise to God on her lips. And her children brought back some of my books. They didn't have to say anything, but they did. They said they had never seen their mother so peaceful, and so contented. A telling comment from children who didn't share their mother's faith. I have a hunch that one day when we look back with new eyes, we may assess things quite differently from how we, and others, see them now – that what *looked* like a tragedy was more like a triumph!

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In Australia today we see a rising hostility from the media, schools and universities, governments and the people *against* Christianity, that is against the *very belief system that has shaped our western world*, with its host of benefits that now we all take for granted.

...for all of education, science, the world of modern medicine and its research, along with the freedom of speech and of the media itself in our western countries are ripples on the pool of Christianity over that last millennium especially, as pointed out by a leading Indian intellectual Vishal Mangalwadi in his “the book that made your world”.

It took a converted Hindu to point out to the West what so many of us have often overlooked! So we are going to need to be ready to be mistreated!

And you see there is no need to fear death!

The Christian gospel tells us that Jesus, pointed out by his cousin John the Baptist as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, after he was delivered up by his Jewish Scribes and Pharisees, died in our place and on our behalf, taking our judgment, and enabling us to be forgiven our sins, and having our consciences cleared! So guilt was taken away, and with it, our fear of death which wields its power through a guilty conscience.

That is the most freeing news in this world. But sometimes we only hear that when we are stopped by some form of suffering through which we hear!

That is my guess at what happened to Jill! Don’t despair if things go hard with you! God is actually in control – He knows you and your problem. It is all in His hands, and you can trust him implicitly. Amen.

Third hymn: by Henry Burton 1840-1930. (T Maurice Wosterholme 1887-1959)

- 1) There's a light upon the mountains and the day is at the spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
weary was our hearth with waiting and the night-watch seemed so long,
but the triumph day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.
- 2) There' a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air,
and the breath of God is moving with the fervent breath of prayer,
for the suffering dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit is the travail of His own.
- 3) Hark, we hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell,
the great triumph song of Jesus, of our King Immanuel,
Zion go ye forth to meet him; and my soul be swift to bring
all your finest and your dearest for the triumph of our King!

Benediction:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA