

How God transforms hardship into something beautiful

Kia ora koutou, those of you who are used to how we usually do things might be wondering where the Bible reading has gone this morning, but I've asked Alan to read the passage to us as we proceed through the message today. And the passage he'll be reading & I'll be speaking from is that magnificent chapter from Romans 8; verses 18 through to 39.

Some of you may be visitors or new to Leith, so I think I should introduce myself. I currently work part-time for a Trust that runs youth clubs & mentoring, called the Rock Solid Youth Development programmes, which are aimed at at-risk & vulnerable young people living in South Dn & the southern part of the city. And during term time, our youth workers & volunteer leaders work with 100 to 150 young people each week. Up until November last year I was also working as Pastor here at Leith, filling in for Richard while he was away doing his two year stint as Moderator. In fact there was a team of us filling that role – Nancy, & also for the first year Waldir, who were were tremendous to work with & we formed a good wee team.

And then towards the end of last year, well probably over the last 6 months of last year, I found that my energy levels were declining, & blood tests showed that all was not well, & by September/October it had become apparent that I would need to go back onto chemotherapy for a disorder that I had first been diagnosed with back in 2014. And that disorder is called lymphoma, which is a form of cancer of the blood cells in the bone marrow & lymph glands.

And so I had already been through this once in 2014, when I had become very unwell. And after three months of chemotherapy with the standard treatment used in NZ at that time, they realized I wasn't getting any better, In fact I was getting worse, & they were needing to give me blood transfusions every few weeks just to keep me going. In fact I was up to my 7th blood transfusion in a row. And so we reached this point where the medical team said we need to stop your treatment, because it's not doing you any good – in fact it's probably doing you more harm than good. The problem was, they didn't have a plan B or another form of treatment they could offer me. Which was a bit disturbing. Now Susan, my wife, is a doctor and a medical researcher by training, & we had already worked out that in the United States they were now using a different type of treatment for lymphoma, with a drug called bendomustine. And so we asked if I could be switched & we could try using bendomustine for my treatment. And the reply came back that, yes, if you have \$100,000 in your pocket you can try it, because that drug is not funded for use here in NZ.

Well, after a lot of back & forward, we persuaded my specialist to put a special funding application into Pharmac, to try & get hold of this drug for me (for free). And my specialist was quite reluctant to do it, because she said *"you don't qualify & I know they won't say yes"*. Well two weeks later I got a call from Dn Hospital saying *"are you Kristin Jack – well this drug called bendomustine has arrived for you – are you ready to come in & start taking it?"* Next time we saw my specialist, she was quite stunned & said I don't understand – *"I talked to them on the phone & they said you wouldn't qualify for this"*. So a small but significant miracle, & over the next few months the progression of the illness was halted. And at the end of my 9 months of chemotherapy, though I was feeling a lot better, the medical team were not optimistic. In fact the word I was given was that I would probably deteriorate fairly rapidly over the next few months once treatment was stopped & you know – that would be that. But God had other plans, & instead of getting worse, I continued to get better & most of my blood functions & readings returned to the normal range. Until, as I said, the middle of last year. And so I'm back on chemotherapy again.

But the good news is that I've gone straight back onto the new drug, bendomustine, which is now funded & available widely across NZ. So I like to think that Susan & I played a role in getting that drug made available for the rest of NZ. And the other good news is that I seem to be responding well to the treatment, & my blood test results are looking good. I have had five rounds already – that is I go into the hospital for two days in a month for an IV infusion, have 28 days to recover - & I've had this 5 times since last November, & have one more to go in March. After that they'll run a whole series of tests to see where my bone marrow is at – with the possibility of one more month's intensive treatment up in Christchurch. But that's uncertain, & we won't know till March.

Anyway, I wanted to give you that background, because it's pertinent to what I want to talk about this morning, which is this whole question of how we cope with hard-times, & how we cope with suffering.

All of us, of course, would prefer to live a pain free, problem-free life. But the big problem is that almost none of us get to do that. In fact, I'm sure that most of us here have issues that are complicated, that are confusing, are perhaps even scary, going on in our lives. And more over, we are not promised a problem free or pain-free life by God. In fact, we are told in *Acts 14:21-22* "*We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.*" Yet sometimes you hear Christianity, being sold to people as if it was the key to a problem free-life. Which is strange when you think about it, because when we read the gospels we encounter a Jesus who was well acquainted with suffering. Yes, Jesus knew joy & he knew laughter & he knew love. We read in places like Luke 10:21 of Jesus being filled with an overflowing joy, & I imagine him being filled with an overflowing laughter at those times too.

We know that Jesus loved a good dinner party & that his first miracle in John's gospel is to go to a wedding feast & transform their big water-jars into vats of wine - in fact Jesus gives the bride & groom & wedding guests something like 180 gallons, or 680 liters of wine. I mean, how much of a good time is that?! In fact at one point the Pharisees, who are very religious, accuse Jesus of being a glutton & wine bibber, so fond he seems of these celebrations & dinners (which in their eyes is deeply irreligious).

And what we see in Jesus is someone who experiences every emotion we experience, in a very deep & profound & beautiful way, because actually, Jesus is the most human being who has ever lived. And so Jesus knows joy & celebration, but he also knows sorrow & pain in the deepest way. Isaiah, prophesying about the Messiah calls him – '*A man acquainted with sorrow*' (Isa 53:3). The shortest verse in the Bible tells us that "*Jesus wept*" (*Jn 11:35*). And when Jesus sees the religious leaders putting religious law ahead of compassion, & putting sacrifice ahead of mercy, putting religion ahead of humanity, he is furious with them. And when he sees them effectively blocking people from coming to know how deeply loved by God they are – he is furious, genuinely angry. And when faced with his crucifixion, we read that Jesus sweated as it were, great drops of blood, & prayed, that if it was possible, that this cup of terrible suffering be taken away from him. So every emotion that we can experience, Jesus is acquainted with.

The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, having given up his equality with God to become like us – was tempted in every way we are tempted, & has suffered in every way we have suffered - & so is now a high priest at the right hand of God who has complete empathy for & with everything we face & go through, & on the basis of that empathy continually intercedes with God the Father on our behalf. GNB = "pleads"

OK, let's now look at today's 1st Scripture passage, & Alan Paterson is going to read it to us, from the Good News version.

Romans 8:18-21:

And here we learn something profound: that since the fall, it is not just humanity that experiences suffering, decay, death and at times a sense of futility – but in fact the whole of creation. But there is a promise & there is a hope, that one day, not just humanity, not just each of us, but the whole of creation will experience redemption & transformation, & freedom.

Verses 22-26:

These verses continue this theme, telling us that that we, along with every other part of the biosphere & the physical Universe do not have a future that is doomed to end in futility, but in fact, every part of creation will finally come to fulfil that purpose which it was created to be, & to do. But for now we must wait for our full redemption. We have tasted the beginnings of that redemption through Jesus coming into our lives & loving us & forgiving us & giving us purpose – but it's only the beginning, & one day it will all be complete & total – for us & for all the Universe.

Now the well-known British Theologian NT Wright speaks a lot in his books about how what Jesus did in his life, death & resurrection is not just a past historical event, but an ongoing & future event, & the pattern that God wills the whole Universe to follow, & will follow. And at this point it would be fascinating to go off on an environmental tangent here, & talk about God's desire to redeem all our ecosystems & our physical world. And we might do that on one of our Saturday morning get togethers. But if you want to read more, I do highly recommend NT *Wright's book 'Surprised by Hope'*, the details of which are in the newsletter.

Verses 26-27.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation that was so difficult or so complex that you simply didn't know how to pray or what to pray for? Or found your self in a situation that was so overwhelming, you even felt like you couldn't pray, or couldn't pray anymore, you were all prayed out. I know I have. When Susan & I were working in Cambodia, there was a period of a few years when people in our community, friends & people we loved, were dying from the AIDS pandemic, we were so wrung out we couldn't pray anymore. But here's a remarkable promise – when we don't know how to pray, when we are all prayed out & can't pray any more – God does not abandon us, but yearns for us even more. God's Spirit with all his love & insight & understanding starts praying for us & starts using even our groans & whimpers & tears. And later on in verse 35 this is reiterated, when we are told that the Son of God, Jesus is also praying & interceding & advocating for us. So when we are at our lowest, & no matter how bad things ever get, let's not despair: we've got some heavy hitters on our side folks.

Now let's move onto to these really well known words found in verses 28-30.

And here Paul tells us that this God who made us & who loves us & who feels our pain & empathises with all our struggles, will take all we're going through, even the worst things, & somehow in his economy, in his time, use them for good if we let him. That's not to say we won't still be left with some confusion & even pain while it is happening – because even Paul who wrote this went through times of pain & confusion. For example, over in 2 Corinthians 4: he writes *"we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are struck down, but not destroyed"*

But in his time, God will use all we go through for good, if we let him. God has a calling on the life of each & every one of us here, & through his life, death & resurrection, & through the power of his Spirit – he has put us right with himself, & he has made us his sons & his daughters & his friends & we are destined for glory.

And one of the incredible fruits that God will bring out of our hard times, it speaks of here in v 29. *God has chosen us to become like his Son Jesus*, & as this whole passage makes clear - struggle & suffering are a part of the transformational process of how we become more like Jesus, the fully human human.

And this is a process that continues as we follow Jesus, & the promptings of his Holy Spirit, and that will culminate when finally we are face to face with Jesus. For 1 John 3:2 gives us this promise:

² My dear friends, we are now God's children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is' (GNB)

Now when we are really going through it, & it's hard to see what good could come out of the situation we are in – this is when we really have to fall back on our trust in the character of God, & the character of Jesus, & how we have known him to be faithful & good to us in the past.

Of course it is possible to give in to despair, & to no longer trust God or his promises. There is a saying that suffering can either make us better people, or bitter people, depending on how we respond to it. But you know there is something suffering can teach us, that nothing else can teach us. You see, if we all got our wish & could live a pain-free life, we'd actually end up being very shallow people. If we never knew struggles or suffering, we would never develop resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from a hard time, & without hard times we'd never develop that inner-strength. It's something we major on in the youth work I'm involved with in Rock Solid. Some of the kids we work with have had really difficult lives, but when we work with them we always focus on their strengths, & keep reminding them of all the challenges they have already survived, & got as far as they have already got. As with a weight-lifter, strength is developed through resistance, through pushing against something heavy & hard. And you know what - if we never experienced suffering, we'd never develop real compassion or real empathy for others, & we'd be very shallow people.

I want to tell you a story about a friend of Susan & mine who lives in Cambodia – although some of you have met him. His name is Phanna, & we got to know Phanna when we first arrived in Cambodia & moved into his neighbourhood, which was a very poor slum community on the edge of the city. We got to know Phanna because when he was 12, & his father was dying & some of the local Christians had undertaken to visit him & nurse him & pray for him each day. Not a Christian. So we joined in & each day we would go around & nurse this guy. Skeletal. Presumed cancer. A couple of days before he died, he had some kind of vision of Jesus. Told the family that they needed to take down the spirit altar & follow Jesus. Well over the next three years we grew close to Phanna & his brothers & sisters, & to his mother who had been made a widow – in fact she really became Susan's best friend in the community, & a key member of the Christian group that met together in that slum.. But 3 years down the track something ominous began to happen. Phanna's mother also began to grow unwell with various infections - & nothing Susan prescribed

for her seemed to be able to help. She went for a blood test & came home with a slip of paper saying that she had the AIDS virus in her blood stream. It was only then that we realised that that Phanna's father 3 years before had not died of cancer but of AIDS, & that he had passed it on to Phanna's mother as well. This was in the days before drugs to treat the AIDS virus were available in Cambodia – & we could only help people die with love & dignity. So we went through the process again, nursing Phanna's mum, until a few months later she too had died.

Now someone like Phanna who has had his parents snatched away from them, it's very easy for them to become bitter or cynical or depressed. I've done enough youth work to know that people like Phanna do often grow up to become angry young men, & can lead very destructive lives. Or self-destructive lives. But Phanna didn't.

And in fact Phanna has grown into an amazing young man. He was out here in NZ last year – he was bought to Dunedin by DCBC, who bought him out to be a speaker at their missions month. And some of you got to meet him because we also had a Friday night event with him up at Leith Valley. These days Phanna is a Pastor, with a growing church in that same community he grew up in, & he has a very beautiful & powerful ministry to street kids, & to young people who are struggling with drug addiction. You see, all those things that had broken his heart as he grew up – instead of allowing them to make him hard or bitter or angry or completely despairing – he had allowed them to soften his heart, & to teach him empathy & compassion. Phanna has allowed God to transform his pain into something beautiful for God, & something beautiful that ministers to others.

This is something I learn from people like Phanna; but even more, this is something we learn from Jesus - the one who empathises with all of our struggles, all our pain, all that we are going through.

The final few verses of Romans chapter 8 – I don't think I need to give any commentary on, because they are so powerful & so beautiful in their own right. So Alan & I will simply read them to us:

Romans 8:31-39

No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us!

For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons nor heavenly powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so here in Romans chapter 8 we have these three beautiful promises that give us hope & give us courage:

- That God can & will bring good out of struggles,
- That there is a purpose to our hard times, & that purpose is that we would become more like Jesus.
- And 3rdly, that no matter what, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that is found in Christ Jesus.

As we come to a close this morning, we are going to finish with a couple more songs this morning that speak of God's love that keeps reaching to us – even through all our struggles, even through our confusion – seeking to make something beautiful out of it all. As we sing, as we worship let's take this opportunity to surrender ourselves & all that's going on in our lives back to God again.

And at the end of those final two worship songs, if you would like to talk or pray about anything hard you are going through in your life right now, Pauline & I will be up the front here & very happy to talk & pray with you.