

## **The Suffering of God**

### **Pentecost 17 - 19<sup>th</sup> September 2010**

***Readings:***

**Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1**

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**“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”**  
**Jeremiah 8:22**

These words, from the prophet Jeremiah, were first uttered, like all scripture, in an historical context. Jeremiah was witnessing the destruction of his way of life by the forces of Babylon. The prophet lived through one of the most turbulent periods of the Ancient Near East. He witnessed the fall of a great empire, the Assyrians, and the rising of an even greater one, the Babylonians. And in the midst of this turmoil sat poor little Judah. She was in the hands of deplorable and incompetent kings, who ignored their God and their people, and tried to play political games with super-powers and ultimately were crushed along with their people.

Into this scene God called Jeremiah to be his prophet. His ministry lasted 40 years and the Book of Jeremiah testifies to his persistent interventions into the affairs of state and his repeated call to repentance and a turning back to God.

And we hear through Jeremiah that Yahweh, his God, was also watching his people slowly slide over the edge into exile in Babylon. In fact during this morning's reading we are not quite sure whether it is Jeremiah's anguish we are hearing or his God's.

Listen to these poetic words from verses 8:21 -

**‘My joy is gone grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her? (Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?) The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.’**

The pain of these words seem unbearable - yet Jeremiah stays and bears it, right up until the sad story ends with Jerusalem and its temple being utterly destroyed in 587BCE, and the people being marched away to Babylon and exile.

Well so much for ancient history I hear you cry. What has this to do with us? In Australia we do not live in such turbulent times. We have been shielded from the strife in other lands by our distance from the rest of the world, despite the boat

people rhetoric to the contrary. Yet we too suffer and our pain in the same as Jeremiah's. I'll be very surprised if there is one among us who hasn't at some time or other offered up Jeremiah's plaintiff call - "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" And whilst it is not on the same catastrophic scale as Jeremiah's or those suffering in the massive floods of Pakistan, it is nonetheless, debilitating to us.

Pain, suffering and loss are all part of the human condition. There is not one here this morning who is immune to them. The pain of loss from the death of a loved one, or perhaps the loss of good health or our job, or even one of our children. There is pain to be borne in all of them. Or perhaps it's the pain that comes with rejection. Rejection by those whom we love, like a child. There is nothing harder than to sit with parents who feel their child has turned his or her back on them.

And even in the very fear of rejection there is pain, like the woman I met at Peter Macallum (Clinic), suffering from terminal cancer who was more pained by the newfound knowledge that she was born before her parents were married than the fact that she only had a short time to live. Her fear of rejection and shame was more powerful than her fear of death.

And then there is of course the pain involved in our guilt. Our guilt about things we have done or not done that have caused hurt to others. The pain in the guilt that many parents feel when their children go off the rails or their marriages fall apart. Oh yes, there is pain here. Pain that need to be heard.

***"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"***

*But I want to say that the answer to Jeremiah's or God's plaintiff cry has to be "yes!" -there is! There is balm in Gilead for us. There is a physician. And often God uses the Christ in others and in us to be that balm, to be that physician.*

And although the balm we can provide or that is provided for us does not take the pain away completely, it does ease the pain because there is hope.

Listen to this story and see what I mean: (From "Stories for Sharing p75)

### **"The Face in the Wall"**

***Before modern treatment there once was a leper colony in Africa for men only. A terrible place, heartbreaking to see and full of hopelessness. There were men with nothing to do and for whom nothing could be done. They were lonely, abandoned men who spent their days prowling around their enclosure. However there existed in the camp one man who seemed different. He went around with a gleam in his eye. He was still able to smile, and if you offered him something he could still say thank you. Somehow he had retained his humanity.***

***The sister in charge of the colony was anxious to know the reason for this miracle, reasoning that it might help the others. What made him different? So she watched him closely for a few days and she soon discovered that there used to appear each day, above the high forbidding wall that surrounded the colony, a small face. The tip of a woman's face no bigger than a hand, but all smiles.***

***Our man would be there waiting to receive his smile, the food of his strength, the balm for his pain, his little injection of hope each day. He would smile back and the head would disappear. Then strengthened, his long wait for the next day would begin afresh.***

***When the sister one day took him by surprise, he simply said, "Before I came here she hid me and looked after me with anything she could get. A native doctor had given her some paste with which she used to treat my disease. Every day she used to smear my face with it, all except one tiny corner ... just enough for her to place her lips. But it couldn't last. They picked me up. She followed me here and when she comes to see me every day, I know that it is because of her that I can go on living.***

The man still suffered from leprosy. The camp remained the same. But his pain was made bearable because of the balm that came from his wife's presence. The balm that came from his wife's love. A love that was able to bear the horribleness of the leper colony and the pain of disease.

And this is the love that comes from God, the love that we as his children are asked to have in staying with people in their pain. It was the love that Jeremiah showed for his people in staying with them through the dismemberment of a nation.

It is the love that God first showed to his people and later to us by staying with us all through all our wandering about in our own private wildernesses. It is the love that is evident in Jesus the Christ who lived our life of pain and suffering. With Jesus living the life we live, God entered directly into the pain and suffering of the world.

Here is a God that goes one better than the small woman at the leper wall. Our God has joined us in the midst of our suffering, sharing the agony. We see it starkly in Jesus on the cross, we are given hope from the Easter story, a story that clearly shows us that pain, suffering, even death does not have the last word. That is the gospel we are called to bring to those who are in pain. It is the gospel for each of us in our pain. We are not alone.

And in ministry, like Jeremiah, like Jesus the Christ, we are called to remain in the midst of pain and suffering. Just as God does not desert those whom God loves, neither should we. Through the week I was with someone who told me of some research project that indicates that a great many people come to church to seek

relief from and comfort for a particular pain in their life. This wasn't news to me, for we all have done as much, turning to the church in times of pain. And at its best the church, Christ's Body on earth has provided that comfort, that balm. But the part of the research that did surprise and saddened me was that it was also claimed that the principal reason for people leaving the church was also to do with pain. When hurt by a loss or a rejection or a death they could find no balm in the church. No one to share their pain. The people interviewed said that they did not go to church for solutions - but they expected someone to be able to sit with them in their pain, to comfort them by their presence. And they were let down.

There are few trained counsellors in our congregations, and that's not what we are expected to do - to have some answer for another's pain. What we are called to do is to offer our suffering brothers and sister a safe place for them to air their pain, giving the wound an opportunity to heal in the open.

And from years of sitting with others' pain I have learned that they neither expect me to take on their pain, nor do they expect simple solutions. They merely want to be heard with the knowledge that they are not alone in the dark place they find themselves in.

In the words of the song, we hold the Christ light for them and it is God's Spirit that does the healing. And thank God for that.

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