

KNEC 26th April 2015

Philippians 1: 12 – 30

I was chatting to my youngest son Fraser on Tuesday evening. I had not yet decided on a text or message for today and I asked him what he thought I should talk about. He has not yet committed to following Jesus but he is open to discussing the gospel and will defend Christianity in conversations with others. Straightaway he said that I should talk about why bad things happen!

I can see why he would ask that question – it is a question asked by many, Christians and non-Christians alike. We are aware of suffering all around us.

At the prayer meeting this week – so many needs – serious illness, sick children, loved ones in hospital and care home, people mourning the loss of loved ones. Christ's church is a suffering church.

We live in a rapidly changing society where there is wealth and complacency and decadence and selfishness and a rejection of God and the church. The national church and the Christian message are under attack, the national church is a suffering church.

Social media and 24 hour news channels and graphic reporting, increasingly graphic in fact, bring home to us that the global church is suffering. There is a growing tide of persecution against Christians.

ISIS and related groups have slaughtered unnumbered Christians in many countries

A church in India set on fire and many killed

15 young Christian men in orange suits beheaded on a beach

Nearly 150 Christian students murdered in Kenya

Why do bad things happen? We do not know. There are hundreds of books and learned articles on the subject but no real answers. Only God knows, only God sees the bigger picture, only God sees from the beginning of creation across the centuries and forward to the end of time.

As I read around this whole area in the bible, I came to Philippians 1 and the section entitled in my bible *Paul's chains advance the gospel*. Paul teaches that it is through our suffering and our reactions to suffering that the gospel of Christ is advanced, the glory of God is proclaimed – through suffering. And so I stopped thinking about why bad things happen and began to focus on how suffering advances the gospel, in other words, how our reaction to suffering influences other people to see God at work, to see the transforming power of Jesus in our lives.

Paul suffered much. As Saul in his previous life, he had been comfortably well off, influential and respected, he had authority and social standing. When he met the living Christ on the road to Damascus, he lost not only his name but all that he had held dear and cherished.

Paul says in Philippians 3: 7 – **Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him.....I want to share in his sufferings.**

Paul suffered beatings and imprisonment many times and he writes his letter to the Philippians from his prison cell.

And the first thing he tells us is that the whole palace guard has become aware of Jesus. They have seen that Paul is in chains because of his faith – and Paul is still full of joy! This is the elite Roman guard at the heart of the Roman empire, Caesar's own household. And later in the letter Paul sends greetings to the Philippians from those believers and saints who belong to Caesar's household.

How the gospel advanced because of Paul's suffering! Paul was able to say, that's why I'm here, this is my purpose! He might not get out of that prison alive but he does not care, in fact he says he would rather die and go to be with Jesus. He is not precious about saving his life. Live or die, his only focus was that Christ would be magnified.

He says “Now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (verse 21)

Paul knows that the Christian path does not skirt around suffering, it goes right through the heart of suffering. And he tells us that whatever happens, we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Paul says we are to stand firm and united in one spirit and we are not to be frightened in any way by those who oppose us. Those who look at us should see faith and fearlessness. Suffering combined with faith produces fearlessness.

Every decision we make, we have to think “Does this make Christ look great?”

Every reaction we have to situations and to other people, we have to think, “Does this glorify Christ Jesus?”

Life can be very hard at times. Suffering that can shake faith and create fear can lead to giving up and separation in relationships and breakdown. But finding faith and fearlessness in suffering can lead to breakthrough and not breakdown. When suffering people demonstrate faith it is powerful and real and authentic, it attracts others to ask what strength have these people found? Who is the source of their love and their faith? Where can I go to experience that breakthrough into a new way of living?

Many of us remember Mr. Gordon Wilson and his daughter Marie, a nurse, at the Enniskillen War Memorial on Remembrance Day in 1987 when a terrorist bomb went off. He held his dying daughter’s hand through the rubble that had buried her and within hours proclaimed that he forgave those who planted the bomb that killed her .

William Ury wrote in his 1999 book *The Third Side*:

In an interview with the BBC, Wilson described with anguish his last conversation with his daughter and his feelings toward her killers: "She held my hand tightly, and gripped me as hard as she could. She said, 'Daddy, I love you very much.' Those were her exact words to me, and those were the last words I ever heard

her say." To the astonishment of listeners, Wilson went on to add, **"But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead. She's in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night."** As historian Jonathan Bardon recounts, **"No words in more than twenty-five years of violence in Northern Ireland had such a powerful, emotional impact."**

If he had ranted and vented his anger at the killers and sought retribution, we would have understood that but we would not have remembered him, he would have been another victim, another parent destroyed by violence. We remember him because he forgave the killers in Jesus name. His suffering advanced the gospel.

Last month almost 150 Christian students were murdered at their college in Kenya, killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The killers went from room to room asking students if they were Christians and immediately shooting those who said they were Christians.

A young student Kenneth Luzakula was standing at the back of the Christian prayer meeting when two gunmen burst into the room. He told journalists: **"They killed all my friends. I was praying with them when we heard gun shots and two guys who wore hoods and carried long guns came in. I escaped because I was standing next to the rear door, so I dashed out with one other friend. I could hear my friends still praying loudly and calling the name of Jesus Christ. Others were screaming. I heard gunshots repeatedly from the toilet nearby where we had hidden. They killed my friends but I know they are all in heaven, because they died worshipping God."**

Faith and fearlessness.

Paul said **"Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."**

I pray that our faith and our fearlessness will never be tested as it was for Mr. Wilson or for these Kenyan students. But most of us will be challenged in small ways and sometimes in big ways to react to suffering with faith and fearlessness.

If we strive to advance the gospel, to carry our Christian faith with us boldly wherever we go, we might face opposition and threat, ridicule and unpleasantness.

We can choose to lie low, keep our heads below the parapet, keep quiet when others threaten our beliefs. But how does that glorify Christ Jesus and advance the gospel?

Paul said **“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”**

Or as The Message puts it **“There’s far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There’s also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.”**

Let us not conform to the ways of the world but strive to conduct ourselves in ways worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ by what we say and how we act. Christians are called to dream and plan and labour and struggle and fight and suffer for the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If we only dream about our next holiday or next car or next house but dream no dreams about anything great or small for the gospel then we are not dreaming the dreams of heaven.

If we are obsessed with the Great British Bake-Off and Masterchef but give little thought to the millions in the world who have no food we are not reflecting the care and compassion of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, we can spend hours watching people spend millions in Location, Location, Location; A Place in the Sun; Grand Design, without giving a thought to the millions in the world with no place to call home.

Do we get more excited about a football cup final or the Open or Wimbledon than we do about the gospel?

Our lives bear witness to our faith. We are observed by our non-Christian family and friends and neighbours and colleagues. They

want to see how Christians respond to illness and conflict and bereavement and suffering and death. Will they be attracted to the gospel of Jesus by what they see in us? Will they say to us that they want what we have?

The bible is full of encouragement for us in our trials and tribulations.

“Jesus said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.' Luke 9:23-24

Peter said (again in The Message) “Friends, when life gets really difficult, don’t come to the conclusion that God isn’t on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.....Trust him. He knows what he’s doing and he’ll keep on doing it. (1 Peter 4: 12)

In the passage about suffering Paul is supernaturally positive. He uses the words rejoicing and hope and eager expectation and overflowing joy.

If you are experiencing joy and hope today then I am glad for you.

If you are struggling in a hard place, then it is my prayer that you will find joy and hope, perhaps find it as you come to the table and meet with Jesus in the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine.

Amen