

“In adversity”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

16th January 2011

Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-34

It's been a tough week:

- images on our screens night after night of raging torrents, surging rivers, flooding waters as far as the eye can see, houses inundated, cars washed away, people struggling in the water, people grieving for lost family;
- and it hasn't just been Qld, it's been northern NSW and parts of Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania too, and WA a few weeks back;
- and further afield Brazil has suffered floods and mudslides with more than 300 killed, in Sri Lanka hundreds of thousands have been flooded and many killed, and in the Philippines more floods and mudslides too;
- and to top it off it's been exactly a year this week since the huge earthquake in Haiti, which took the lives of 230,000 people and still, 12 months later, has 800,000 people homeless.

A tough week.

Adversity comes to all of us sooner or later. Maybe not the sudden deaths of multiple family members (hopefully not), maybe not becoming victims of shocking natural disasters, maybe not dramatic tragedies, but one way or the other we all face adversity in our lives - be it the deaths of parents or spouse or sibling or child, or the challenge of a failure at university or being retrenched from work or living through a marriage break-up or facing a life-threatening disease. We all face adversity in our lives.

How we deal with these periods of difficulty is a key issue for the quality of our lives. How we maintain some degree of positive-ness when life seems nothing but bleak, painful, depressing, is far from easy.

So when I came to today's Bible readings, shared by 85-90% of churches throughout the world today, I found myself viewing them through the prism of what do they say about how we handle adversity. And I found a few clues:

- Second Isaiah (the prophet responsible for chapters 40-55) lived at a time of terrible adversity for the people of Israel; the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar had conquered them, destroyed Jerusalem including its beautiful temple, killed thousands and taken off into captivity thousands more. It looked like the end of the Hebrew nation, all the more so when Isaiah and other prophets saw their plight as God's punishment for the nation's lack of faith and obedience to God. But in their desperation in exile in Babylon, Isaiah holds the people together by also looking forward, by assuring the people God has not in fact given up on them, and he holds out a vision of God acting anew, restoring the nation, and from that renewal of faith and life acting to bring light to all the nations and salvation to all the earth. And the people grasped Isaiah's vision, turned afresh to God, and were indeed restored a generation later back into their homeland, to live anew. God never gives up, God does not abandon, with God there is always hope.
- Most of Paul's letters are written to churches in trouble, where they're distorting the faith, failing to live as Christians, where they're dividing into sects. So Paul castigates them in his letters and calls them back to the truth of the gospel - but in every letter

before he gets stuck into them, just as in One Corinthians today, he finds something positive about them to affirm, something good to say about them. The Christian faith never writes people off, there is good in everyone - so if our hard time is being caused by someone else, don't condemn them out of hand, look for the positives too.

- And Jesus commences his mission from God, to take away the world's sin, to gift the Holy Spirit, at a time when God's people were suffering mightily, under Roman rule, heavily taxed, freedoms severely restricted, a people oppressed. That's the time when God acts for liberation, for healing, for people's wholeness, for reconciliation with God and with each other, for the salvation of all, in Christ.

So, how are we to deal with adversity in our lives? There are many elements in the answer, and among them are these:

- first and foremost know that God loves you. that God will never abandon you - we see that in the actions and the teaching of Jesus; despite all the struggles and suffering you're undergoing, God is there for you, turn to God and draw from his love, strength, and peace;
- secondly, pray - communicate with God, be like the Psalmists and tell God how you're feeling, even perhaps that you're angry with God for the raw deal you're suffering; and in your praying, listen. listen for how God is reaching out to you in love, caring for you, and communicating with you;
- thirdly, accept help from others - that help may in fact be God's provision for us; how uplifting to see all those people turning out in Qld as volunteers to help in the dreadful job of cleaning up after the flood; people are very often God's shoulder for us to lean on, they may well be God's hands assisting us and they may be God's word for us - their counsel may be God's guidance for us; receive from God as you receive from others;
- fourthly, try to see your plight in perspective; sure, whatever adversity we face is terrible, it's hard; but maybe we're not alone, maybe there are still positive things in our lives, maybe we do still have some blessedness, something we can lean on and be thankful for, even if it's only thankfulness that things aren't worse; [the Qld floods don't seem so bad, with 30 or more tragic deaths, when we're reminded that 12 months ago over 230,000 people were killed in the Haiti earthquake;]
- fifthly, remind yourself of what is still good about yourself, what abilities and character traits you have been given by God, what rightly deserves affirmation in you and in your life; remember there is good in you and in every human being, focus on the positive;
- and sixthly, look forward, imagine, as the prophets did, a time when God is acting afresh in uplifting ways for you and for our community and nation.

Adversity comes to all of us, but it does not have to destroy us. God is with us, as Paul tells us later on in his letter to the Corinthians, there is always faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

To the glory of God. Amen.