

Nothing can separate us from God's love

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connore
Revd Rebecca Newland
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost — 27 July 2014

Romans 8:26-39.

The news is sad at the moment isn't it? Always somewhere in the world there is a war, or a famine, a disaster. Always someone somewhere is suffering. With the terrible loss of life and home in Israel and Palestine and the tragic crash of the Malaysian plane it seems particularly poignant at the moment. Suffering is a part of life—a horrible, distressful, painful, long-lasting reality.

At 18, I was in a car accident in which one of my best friends was killed. That loss has reverberated in my family and social networks for over 25 years. I still think of Vincent with sadness. When my father died 15 years ago from cancer it ripped apart my family and we are living with the consequences. These are obvious examples of suffering and it makes sense that we feel the pain of such loss.

Yet suffering can come from the strangest places. As I look at my life the thing that has caused me the most suffering is my children—on some level far more than the death of Vincent or my father or any of the other myriad causes of pain in my life. I don't mean that my children have been horrible or difficult. They are wonderful people whom I adore. The suffering has been because of that love. The worry and fear that comes with being a parent is sometimes overwhelming. You just ache for your kids. You ache that they grow up and a band-aid and a kiss no longer takes away all their pain. As a parent you suffer along with them. There is also the distress that I still feel to this day because for a number of years my children did not live with me.

I have a photo beside the bed of me and the kids taken about 13 years ago. We are standing at a lookout facing the camera. I have one each under each arm and we are all smiling, but I know that that photo was taken at a time when we lived apart. The pain of being separated from them is still with me years later. It is a dull ache in my heart. You would each have stories of loss and grief, or pain and suffering, of dreams unfulfilled, of loved ones gone, of the desire for peace and justice thwarted.

The thing about the Christian message is that suffering is always addressed indirectly and directly. Jesus himself was not some spiritual being untouched by the messiness, the pain and distress that is part of human life. He lived it deeply and fully. This is not ever to say that the suffering is good. What it does say is that suffering is real and must be faced and felt.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul talks about the suffering that comes through sin, the fracturing of the created and social order. Because of that fracturing, there is pain and distress on many levels. The fracturing can come about through acts of oppression, prejudice, violence, hatred and resentment. This is the result of a spirit in revolt and rebellion against the rule of love. In the chapter we have heard from today, there is also the suffering of creation itself that groans in pain. Groaning in the expectant hope that it will be released from the consequences of human sin. Paul also talks about the suffering that comes from being a follower of Christ—he names hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and the sword. This is happening in many parts of the world today. In just this last week Christians in Mosul Iraq have finally been driven out of their ancestral home. There have been Christians in Mosul for nearly 2,000 years.

They are now homeless, their possessions confiscated and their lives in continued danger.

Suffering is a significant theme of this eighth chapter of Romans but there is an even stronger theme, the greatest theme of the whole chapter—the love of God. The last three verses of chapter eight are simply sublime. *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul speaks of God's love as the ultimate security. When we look at the cross we see there the strong evidence of how much we are loved. When I think about the love I feel for my children I get just a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the love of God. The task of the Christian life is to open oneself more completely and fully to that love. One of my favourite Christian writers, an evangelical preacher called Oswald Chambers, talked about suffering and the way Christians sometimes talk about it. You all would have heard the idea that God sends us trials and tribulations to teach us something. Chambers says, "no". Suffering is not how we learn a life's lesson. It is how we *unlearn* something that is getting in the way of fully experiencing God's love.

Through our lives we are given opportunities to lay down barriers to God's love and fully trusting that love. We have layers of fear and pain, layers of ego and defence mechanisms, layers of assumptions and stories, layers of illusion. I have a layer that is a screaming defiant atheist who can find a million reasons why God does not exist and why he cannot be trusted. There is a part of me that is Richard Dawkins's greatest fan.

Our journey through life is about unlearning these barriers. It is about letting go of these layers and giving them up. It is about getting back to that point where we are as new again. That in itself is a painful process and one that we nine-times-out-of-ten will not do willingly. Some people can never do it. We hang on for dear life to those barriers.

The world's religions all have something to say about why we remain shut up in our world, separated from God. Why we cannot trust this love. The Hindus say it is due to ignorance, to *avidya*. The soul has lost the knowledge of God's love and is caught in the net of illusion. The Buddhists agree but add that it is because we cling to a separate notion of self. Somehow we have the illusion of an independence that stands over and against the other. A Muslim tradition says that 'Your own existence is your greatest sin'—that is your separate existence apart from God. But according to Christian teaching, the root cause of both ignorance and of self-love is sin—that is turning away from God, from the truth of reality and rejecting that love.

But God's love, learnt and experienced in the human heart, is the ultimate human fulfilment. It is the love of Christ, which passes all knowledge. It is the peace of God, which passes all understanding. Our true identity does not come from "I think therefore I am" or from "I shop therefore I am" but from "I am loved therefore I am". Our response to that love is "here I am" - the response of Abraham, Isaac, Samuel, Elizabeth, Mary and Jesus. But to get to that place of being able to say "Here I am," to be able to trust enough to respond fully, we need to know we are loved and trust that love. We need to become like little children who have not yet laid down a lifetime of defence mechanisms and intellectual barriers.

But we are so distrustful are we not? We have learned, and often painfully, that people who say they love us cause us great pain. We have learnt that expressions of love can often be a cover for exploitation and manipulation. We have learnt that when someone offers you something for

nothing you'd best be suspicious of their motives. But when it comes to God's love these are learning's that must be unlearned. They like all the other layers must be released. That is why this section of chapter eight is so powerful.

Somehow Paul's words rip through our defences, our fears. It is like the veil being lifted for just a moment so that we glimpse the power of God's love that is more constant than the sun, more sure than the tides and deeper than the ocean.

Paul has spent eight chapters of theological argument and assertion to get us to this point—that because of the gracious gift of Jesus Christ and his Spirit we have the fullest assurance of God's love. There is nothing that can come between us and that love—nothing.

Can death? No. Can life? No. Can angels, rulers or any powers? No. Can whatever is in the present moment? No. Can hardship, grief, distress, depression, persecution, starvation, peril or the sword? No. There is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from God's love. When Dante spoke of the 'love, which moves the sun and the other stars', he was not using a metaphor; he was describing the nature of reality. God's love is more real than the universe.

It calls across the dark intervals of meaning, reaches into the depths of human despair, embraces those who live in the shadow of death and the over bright light of present life. It challenges the rulers of the world and shows them up as a sham. It looks at the present with clear faith and at the future with sure hope. It overpowers all powers that might get in the way. This powerful, overmastering love grasps Paul and sustains him in his preaching, journeying, writing, persecution and suffering. This is the love, seen supremely in the Cross, that reaches out to the whole world with the Exodus message of freedom. It is the word of joy and justice.

Thanks be to God that in Jesus we have a man who turned back to God, who knew the essential truth about God's love and who surrendered himself to that love in total self-giving. Thanks be that in Jesus God reveals himself—eternal, enduring, ever present. A love that gives of itself, loses itself in love and finds itself in love. That is the reality from which we are called to trust and live our lives every minute and every day—to get to the point where we truly know that in our hearts and minds means we need fear nothing. We can let go of anxiety, concerns and worries about the future. There is nothing we can ever do that will take us away from God and his love.