

Easter in Exodus (1) Exodus 5:20 – 6:12 & Rom. 8:18-25,38  
09/01/05am

### **From Exodus Helplessness to Easter Hope (1)**

*Stench, trouble, groaning, discouragement, cruel bondage,  
present suffering, decay ... (1B)*

These are the sort of words that would describe what we've been seeing in the aftermath of the Tsunami wave – these words aren't even enough to describe the awfulness of what happened in the countries around the rim of the Indian Ocean in the early morning of Boxing Day, or the tragedy with which so many people will live with for the rest of their lives. [ (2) **Tsunami scene** ]

Words like *stench, trouble, groaning, discouragement, cruel bondage, present suffering, decay ...* have probably been used in the TV and newspaper reports from Sri Lanka, Sumatra or Thailand, but I actually found them in the Bible portions that we read this morning, from Exodus 6 and Romans 8 – and strangely, William and I had earmarked Exodus 6 long before Christmas! So maybe these Scripture passages will help us in our thoughts about the Tsunami disaster, and maybe they will also help us to know where our Christian faith, which we profess so explicitly on Communion Sunday, fits into all of this and makes a difference. Let me give you this heading to begin with:

#### **1. A World of Desperate Groaning. (3A)**

The sheer misery and hopeless despair summed up in a word like 'groaning' says it all – the devastation and death that the Tsunami brought, to both holiday makers and local people, is on a scale that is almost beyond our comprehension – 150,000 killed, some never to be found or identified; at least as many injured; millions of people left homeless and helpless; huge numbers of orphaned children. It is a horror most dreadful.

- From the security of our homes we watch with the desperate, incomprehensible groaning of feeling for those people, and we try to give something that we hope will help.

- In those countries and islands around the rim of the Indian Ocean, it is the desperate groaning of reality - the utter despair

and yet amazing courage. And it will not be over for a very long time, and for many the memories will never go away.

The Tsunami disaster has perhaps served to remind us that we all live in a world where life is very uncertain, where things happen that seem to be completely beyond our control or anyone's fault, and where there is sheer, unrelieved *suffering, trouble and decay* – to use the very words of our Bible passages.

This is a world that is full of desperate groaning as well as delightful happiness.

- In Exodus 6, we hear about the ancient Israelites *groaning* under the cruelty and oppression of slavery in Egypt. Anything they had tried to do seemed to make their situation even worse – and these were people who looked in faith to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but for them life was still desperately awful.

- And in Romans 8, we hear Paul talking about people of Christian faith *groaning inwardly* through the hard experiences of life. And it goes even further than that, says Paul – for it seems as if the whole world is struggling under an irresistible burden of suffering and decay – the very creation *groaning ...right up to the present time.*

This is not a pleasant or pretty picture of life in our world – I suppose we need to say that neither is it the whole picture, for there is much in life that is lovely and delightful to us – but we cannot get away from the reality that this is **a world of desperate groaning** – there is no point in saying otherwise, for if we do we will be mocked by the individual situations of suffering and sickness and sadness that we meet in our own lives, as well as by the situations of whole-scale disaster such as we have seen this past week or two.

The Bible does not close its eyes to how life in the world really is, and nor should we. It tells it as it really is, and so must we. This is a world of desperate groaning.

And that brings us to our 2<sup>nd</sup> heading:

## **2. An Honesty about Difficult Questions. (3B)**

The Bible not only recognises that this is a world of desperate suffering, but it is almost brutally honest about the difficult questions that even people of faith have to struggle with.

It surely took some honesty for the Archbishop of Canterbury to say publicly this week that the Tsunami had shaken him and made him struggle with the very difficult questions of how or why such a thing could happen under God's rule.

And maybe we, too, struggle with questions like that – either about the indiscriminate destruction of the Tsunami Wave, or maybe in situations where we cannot understand the tragedies of illness or accident that strike individuals or families that we know.

Is it not helpful to recognise that the Bible displays openness and honesty about such difficult things? I think that it is helpful - that the Bible doesn't give us the impression that people of proper faith should never have any difficult questions.

Look again at this passage in Exodus with the Israelite foremen asking very difficult questions - complaining bitterly, bitterly, to Moses, and Moses complaining very frankly to God that things had only got worse: *Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.* (5:21)

It doesn't get much more honest than that.

And in Romans 8 you get the impression that Paul and the people who would read his letter were feeling the same kind of honest, difficult questions – for otherwise why would he feel it necessary to assure them that *our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed?*

So it doesn't look as if we are meant to either dodge the difficult questions, or to feel that proper faith will make those sort of questions redundant.

Let's make no bones about it; it can be very, very hard for us to understand why such an awful disaster should devastate the lives

of so many people, including thousands of little children, when we believe that this is God's world.

And, there are no easy answers, nor should we try to offer simplistic explanations, in the situations where lovely lives and good people are struck by terrible problems with tragic outcomes.

It doesn't make the difficult individual 'why' questions much easier, but what Paul says about life in our world at present, in Rom. 8, is usually the underlying truth that we need to understand, at least a little.

He refers to the whole of creation groaning *in its bondage to decay* – the whole created world, and all of life in it, groaning because it is desperately damaged, falling apart at the seams, subject to steady decay – the created world not working as it should nor as God intended it – with the fault lines of earthquake, and climate extremes, and sickness and suffering, running right back to the time when God said to Adam, *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life ...until you return to the ground ... for dust you are and to dust you will return.*

The Bible seems to tell us that from the time men and women first turned their backs on God, not only were their own lives diminished, but, like the Tsunami wave, which began far beneath the earth's surface, spreading out with devastating damage to affect all of created nature and all of human life – far beyond any simplistic way of saying that because I did this, that will happen. The whole earth and all of life is caught up in a world that is in bondage to decay, says Paul – and it will be like that until the day God liberates it into *the glorious freedom of the children of God.* So we shouldn't feel that we have to dodge the hard questions – we can be honest about them, and about the struggle to cope with them – even as people of faith who see a little of where the problem all started.

So, 1) A world of desperate groaning and 2) an honesty about difficult questions, but let me give you a 3<sup>rd</sup> heading from today's readings:

### **3. A Promise about Definite Deliverance (3C)**

Because the Bible is so open and honest about the groaning struggles and perplexing questions of life in the world, even for faith people, it is maybe a little easier for us to take its promises of definite deliverance much more seriously.

If the Bible is so honest about the problems, we can, more seriously believe that it is also honest about the promises.

Exodus 6: 2ff *God also said to Moses, I am the Lord .....*

*moreover I have heard the groanings of the Israelites .....* I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment ... then you will know that I am the Lord your God...

Here was a promise of definite deliverance – although the people, and even Moses himself, found it very difficult to see how it would ever be fulfilled: *Moses reported this to the Israelites but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage.* Suffering made them very hard to persuade; their groaning misery made them more than a little deaf!

And this help wasn't some kind of magic wand that God waved, that brought instant relief and hope, and that the people would have no doubts about – this was a promise that had to be received and believed, in the face of all the suffering and signs to the contrary – and it took them a while to do so.

This also seems to be the way God's promises of deliverance are described by Paul in the other reading from Romans. He speaks about our own lives being redeemed from all groaning and suffering, and indeed, about all creation being *liberated from its bondage to decay*. But not instantly, for Paul writes in 8: 24 *For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all ... but if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

It seems that this is speaking about holding unto the hope of God even when everything around us seems to deny it – almost holding on by our finger nails at times, when it would be easier to let go in despair.

The section of Rom. 8 that we used as an affirmation of faith told us something more about how to hold on in the face of a groaning world and a struggling life.

We hold on, says Romans 8, for one reason alone, and one reason only: *If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

We hold on to the promises of God's definite deliverance because even though there are many things we do not understand, we do know that our hope in God comes from Jesus Christ whom he sent and whom he gave up for us. This Jesus, says Romans 8, *died ...was raised to life ...and is at God's right hand interceding for us.*

Like the man who was saved only by holding unto an uprooted palm tree, floating in the sea for 8 days, our only hope in a suffering, groaning world comes from holding unto Jesus, when everything else around us is not at all certain or secure, and sometimes is completely swept away.

Because he was holding unto hope in Jesus, who lived and died and rose again, Paul writes those famous, fabulous words of hope: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither 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.*

This is God's promise of definite hope – it is anchored in Christ Jesus – but it has to be held unto in all the ups and downs of life in a world where so much else speaks of trouble and hopelessness.

In a world where it is often more like *Exodus Helplessness* we are only able to make the journey through *Easter Hope*. This will

be the underlying theme of this series of sermons from now until an early Easter this year. But we make this journey most of the time. Therefore we need those great words that Paul gave to the Christians at Rome: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* And as he wrote to some other Christian people, at Corinth, *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles (!) are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* (2 Corinth 4:16)

And this service of Communion always brings us back to Jesus Christ and to the hope that comes through him – our fixed point of hope in a shifting world of hopelessness. As we take the bread and wine, and as we think about all that they speak of, we might make some words from Ps. 61:2 into our deepest prayer: *I call as my heart grows faint, lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.*

1) A world of desperate groaning; 2) An honesty about difficult questions; 3) A promise about definite deliverance. And one final heading – short but seriously important:

#### **4. A Response of Doing Faith Deeply. (3D)**

Yes, this heading does mean faith that actually does things, but, first and foremost, it means doing things about faith – we need to ‘do faith’ for our own lives, more than just knowing about faith. We need to do something deliberate, something deep within us, something definite in terms of the personal reality of our own lives.

Moses, and his brother Aaron, had to take their courage in their hands, put their trust in the God who had promised them help and hope, and step forward in faith. Contrary to all that he felt he wanted to do, Moses had to speak, again, to Pharaoh.

Like Moses and Aaron, and the people they represented, we have to learn to take our courage in our hands, and step out from our own comfortable little world into the reality of trusting and following Christ with our lives.

We have to do that again and again – we have to do it when it would be easier to hold back and do less.

We have to step out to trust in Christ when it might be more conducive to simply believe about Christ or belong to his church. We have to step out with earnest, inward faith and with outward ‘doing’ faith - *Moses and Aaron did just what the Lord commanded them* – they went to Pharaoh!

If our trust in Christ through whom we cannot be separated from God’s love and hope, is for real, then we will be people who are ‘doingly’ committed to his way and his work – in our daily lives, in our church, and in the needs of his groaning world.

When we ‘*do this in remembrance of him*’ we are professing a ‘doing faith’ – a faith of trusting him deep within, and then a faith that is trusting him in the doings of our lives everyday, everywhere. It is then that God’s promises of definite deliverance mean something for us, and will mean something in his world through us.

Today we should come very thankfully to this Table of our Lord, and to these symbols which speak so powerfully of his love and hope for us, and for this suffering world of which we are so conscious this new year.

- We find mighty help and encouragement as we share in these living reminders of Christ our Deliverer and our Hope.

- We find, again, that challenge to make sure that he is our Deliverer and Hope.

- We find ourselves knowing that we must be people of help and hope in his name, in very needy world.

## **From Exodus Helplessness to Easter Hope (1)**

*Stench, trouble, groaning, discouragement, cruel bondage,  
present suffering, decay ... (1B)*

### **(2) Tsunami scene**

Would it be possible to superimpose the following 4 headings on top of the Tsunami disaster picture? If not simply use them as straight headings.

**A World of Desperate Groaning. (3A)**

**An Honesty about Difficult Questions. (3B)**

**A promise about definite deliverance (3C)**

**A Response of Doing Faith Deeply. (3D)**

## **Prayer of Adoration, Thanksgiving, Confession and Intercession.**

### ***To God be the glory:***

- for glory belongs to God throughout the ages of time and the expanses of eternity ..... And so we bow to worship you, O God, with humble reverence.

### ***To God be the glory:***

- for glory belongs to God in this time of our own lives ..... and so we come to give you, O God, our heartfelt thankfulness for you love towards us in body, mind and spirit.

### ***To God be the glory:***

- for glory belongs to God, who at the right time sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the light and hope of the world ... and so we come before you, O God, with faith and trust.

### ***To God be the glory:***

- even at this dark time in the world, when we cannot begin to understand the scale and the depth of the tragedy that has struck SE Asia.

O God, we struggle with the questions of why should an awful thing should happen – help us, we pray, to be reassured of your loving care for all the world; to know that in God we may trust and should trust amidst all the dark and difficult things of life; and to be active as channels of your love and help to people and places that have suffered and lost so much.

Forgive us, O Lord, for we have to confess how so much of our living is self-centred and materialistic; forgive us when we only really see the suffering needs of your world when something especially awful happens; forgive us when we leave you out of our thinking about life in the world for so much of the time and then are sometimes inclined to wonder where you are when things are difficult in our lives and in our world.

Forgive us, O Lord, we humbly ask, not because we deserve it, but for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

O God, we give you thanks for the massive international response to the Tsunami disaster and we take time now to pray that all the help may be used wisely and in an effectively co-ordinated way. Therefore we pray for governments, for the United Nations and for the many Relief Agencies.

We continue to remember before you all who have suffered and lost so much, and for whom the trauma is so deep and will be so permanent.

O Lord, we thank you that through Jesus Christ, your own dear Son, even we are able to call you, Our Father. As we worship you today, we ask that we will be renewed in trust, looking unto Jesus in whom we meet your sure and steadfast commitment to our lives and to our world. And as we look to Jesus, may our commitment to him also be renewed, both inwardly and in active, practical ways.

We ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen