

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2011
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Isaiah 49: 8-14; Matthew 6: 25-34



“God’s Suffering”

We have, this week, seen a lot of suffering and devastation come past. First there was the bloody suppressing of the uprising in Libya by Colonel Gaddafi, then the earthquake in New Zealand. Two very different events, both involving loss of life, suffering and devastation. And as always, for any person of faith, in the middle of that arises the question: “Where in all of this is God?”, or even: “Is there a God in all this?”

Early in the week, before the news of both these events broke, I found the picture that is on the cover of our order of service. It struck a chord, somehow, and I left the page open on my screen where I could see it. Not sure if it would be of any use. Not sure if it had anything to do with the lectionary passages for this Sunday.

Isaiah offers us the reassuring image of God as mother. Indissolubly connected to her children. Or better still, even more than that. “Even these may forget, but I will not forget you”. He offers us the picture of our names, the essence of who we are, tattooed into God’s hands, indelible, like a cheat sheet of love that will never wear off. Wouldn’t a nice picture of a mother and child have been more appropriate for our cover? Or a fluffy love heart? Or a pair of hands, palm up, scribbled with words of love? Legitimate and very comforting images of who and what God is according to the prophet: Loving, caring, connected, committed.

Matthew tells us not to worry and to strive only for the Kingdom of God. To let go of our anxiety of what tomorrow might bring, or how we can secure abundance of life for ourselves and our loved ones into the far future. No worries - be happy! And he offers us the image of birds sailing on the wind and grass waving in the wind. Should I have found a picture of birds, or waving grass to remind us that God loves us and looks after us, just like he looks after the birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees? Again these would have been appropriate images, connecting us with imagery that is part of how our faith tradition thinks about God. God the creator who cares for his creation.

Wouldn’t that have been a better look than this hand, attached to a piece of wood, with a big, ugly nail right through the middle of it?

Not for me, no. Not at this time. Because I don’t think we would do God justice if we portrayed her in rosy pictures of love and protection, of birds and flowers in the soft glow of a balmy autumn day when the reality we encounter is as hard and cruel as the one that has been unfolding this week. There is more to God.

What our faith tells us is that where God touched our lives most intimately there was blood involved and suffering. There was death and destruction, violence and hate. There were people finding shelter with each other, scared out of their minds for what was happening, worried sick about the future. And that somehow, in the middle of all that, the stone of death was rolled away and the hope of Easter morning broke through the night.

When Jesus came he showed us the God that loves her children like a mother hen her chicks. Who

brings healing and hope to the desperate, who doesn't break the bruised reed, but surrounds what is fragile and vulnerable with her care and compassion. He showed us the God who makes the birds sing and the flowers grow. But he also showed us a God who is there when suffering comes and death takes its toll.

As Christians we believe God was there, not only with Christ, but *in* Christ when he was brought to the cross. That God hurt when that nail was put through Jesus' hand and that God still hurts, every time one of his children is nailed to a cross. That God went down into the depths of death when the sun went down that Friday, not letting go. Even there, even then, holding on to love, holding the name of Joshua Ben Joseph, Jesus Joseph's son, that had been scribbled in his hand from the beginning of time in his wounded fist.

Looking at the hand we find on the front cover today we may see the hand of God. The hand of an artisan, used to shaping beauty out of the raw materials he finds, providing for the basic needs of life: the framework for a home, tables, chairs, beds, and, in Jesus' day, bowls, spoons, mugs and many other things. A calloused hand that has known hard work and has felt the grain of wood softening under its touch. A strong hand with well developed muscles and sensitive fingers that can mould an uncompromising and unruly reality and breathe life into an unpromising block of material. A hand that, when you feel its comforting touch on your shoulder, you know to be scarred with deep wounds of its own.

In our scriptures we find a wealth of comforting and supportive images about God. Both male and female. Images that paint the picture of one who is close, involved, committed, care-full, compassionate, sensitive, strong, bearing and caring, creative and creating.

For me the image of the suffering Christ is one of the most powerful of all. It tells me that when human voices cannot sing and human hearts are breaking, we can bring our grief to God, who knows our inner aching.

Not a detached far away God sitting on a cloud somewhere looking down on planet earth from a safe distance. But a God who went to the cross in Christ. Not an impassable, impassive God, who is above it all, but a God who takes the raw material of this world and moulds it with patience and care into his loving image. Not a stern intimidating God, but a God who scoops us up in her arms like a mother, carries us in his hands like a father, and does not let go. No matter what happens, no matter how deep the pain. Ever. Who is right in there, with us, in us, bearing the pain and providing us with the strength that is needed to not let death and darkness claim victory. Amen.

Image from http://www.zetousa.com/store/inscribed_550.jpg