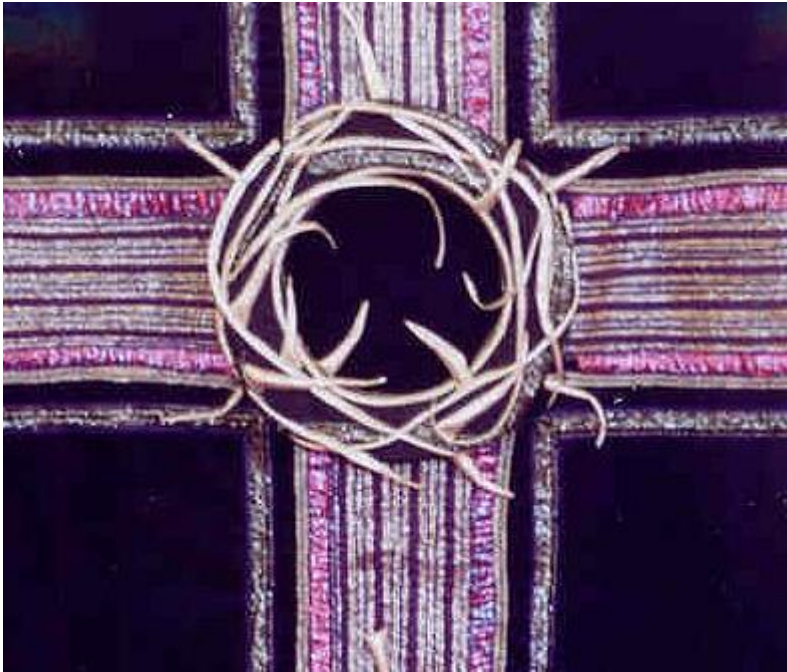


# GATHERED AROUND THE CROSS

Together we accompany Jesus on the Way of the Cross



Reflections for the 40 days of Lent,  
by the people of Good Shepherd, Ringwood,  
and Our Saviour's, Knox, Lutheran Churches.

March 2006

## From the Editor:

Sunday by Sunday we gather around the Cross to worship, to confess, to praise and to thank our Lord. We gather around the cross to lay down our burdens and to bring the burdens of others to the loving heart of Jesus.

The forty days of Lent lead us into deeper reflection on the suffering of Jesus, and our own suffering. These meditations come from the lives and experiences of our people. As we prepare to walk the way of the Cross, we open ourselves to each other, telling our stories and sharing our joys and sorrows. Listen to one another and hear again how God works in the lives of his people.

A sincere thank you to the writers. It has been a great privilege to receive each contribution as it was completed and I thank God for the talents of each and every one of them. Thank you also to Coralie Pietsch for formatting the original printed book, and to Robert Mau for preparing the cover design, using Ora Molenaar's beautiful work.

**Erika Hoffmann.**

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## Temptation

*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13 NRSV*

Temptation is always present to draw us away from God and his plan for our lives. But God understands what we are going through. Jesus was tempted and resisted being drawn into sin by the evil one. How wonderful that it is God's will not to let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. Through temptation, God also makes us stronger – just as iron is tempered and strengthened in the fire, so we become stronger through the Holy Spirit living within us. And lest we succumb to sin and temptation, how amazing it is that God also provides a way out so that we can stand up under it. Each day, through our baptism and God's grace we are renewed in him and our sins are forgiven.

**Heavenly Father, please strengthen me with your Holy Spirit so that I do not give into temptation and sin. Thank you Jesus for resisting temptation and dying for me. Amen.**

Thursday – Day 2

## Hearing Jeremiah

*The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die!" Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, "It is the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you." Jeremiah 26:7-8,12-14 NRSV*

How the truth stings sometimes! Like Jeremiah's angry audience, we too find ourselves angry and defensive if somebody should dare to point out to us that our words or actions have not been right. The more we know they are right, the more it hurts. Our indignation sends us on a counter-attack: How dare they? Who are they to judge when they are so imperfect themselves? Who do they think they are anyway?

Then perhaps, as time passes and our pride resettles, it may dawn on us that who it was that spoke the hard truth is actually irrelevant. They, like Jeremiah, were actually delivering *the Lord's Word*. We can rail against the person who spoke to us or point to *their* failings. We can threaten and bully them. We can make excuses in an attempt to release ourselves from responsibility for our actions, but in the end, it is the Lord we have to deal with, and it is his truth that finds its way to us and leads us to a needed change of heart and direction.

**Lord, enable me to hear the hard truths I might sometimes need. Lead me to turn away from my wrong words and actions, and give me your Spirit to renew me and make me joyful and strong in your grace. Amen.**

Friday – Day 3

### Speak the Word Boldly

*I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. Philippians 1:12-14 NRSV*

When are we ever required to be ‘in chains’ because of our faith? Here Paul makes it very clear that the reason he is in chains is not because he has done anything wrong, but because of his preaching and teaching about Jesus. Thinking through my life I have to wonder whether I have ever been placed in confined or difficult situations because of my faith – my answer would be never! I would suggest that this is true for most Australians. We are very blessed to live in a country where we can openly worship and express our faith without fear of retribution or prison.

Yet in many ways we place ourselves in ‘chains’ – chains that can restrict the way we openly and publicly profess and speak our faith. These ‘chains’ come in the form of fear of rejection and ridicule, our doubts or perhaps our lack of confidence in speaking about our faith. Whatever our personal ‘chains’, Paul shows us in this passage that they can still provide wonderful opportunities and benefits that we would never have expected. Paul’s physical restrictions did not stop him preaching and teaching about Christ – “the whole imperial guard” knew why he was in chains and it served to encourage others to speak the word of God courageously and fearlessly. Therefore, let us not be afraid of the often ‘self-imposed’ chains that we experience, or allow them to

consume and take over us. Rather pray that they can be used as a source of encouragement to others and a witness that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour.

**Dear Lord, we often find it so difficult to speak your word boldly and fearlessly. We give thanks for the example of your Apostle Paul, and pray that you will help us to find ways to overcome the ‘chains’ in our life, so that we too may witness to the wonderful love and grace that you bring in our lives. Amen.**

Saturday – Day 4

Hardships and difficulties facing us....

*And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Acts 20:22-24 NIV*

“If only I may finish the race and complete the task...”

As a child I did not enjoy running in the Sunday School picnic races. Always I finished last! And nearly always I was the last to be chosen for any team games. How embarrassed I felt and how I envied the physically fit and sporty types, who won the prizes.

In fact my whole life since the age of six months has been one of physical health problems, which have challenged me in various ways. At times I have felt overwhelmed, and sometimes imprisoned, by the ongoing hardships faced daily in my body.

However, over some sixty years God has graciously sustained me, given me strength to bear the difficulties and uncertainties and lifted me up time and time again. Knowing that Christ united himself to our broken human condition in his baptism and passion has given me faith to endure. Through his being lifted up, God has lovingly chosen each one of us to be in his New Life Team.

During this time of Lent, the Holy Spirit is calling us again to reflect on our own race with him in the detailed complexity of our daily life, lived in the resurrection won for us by Jesus Christ. The purpose of our race is to testify to God's grace always at work in us, transforming each one of us into the likeness of Christ, his beloved Son and Captain of his human team.

**Lord, help me to run and finish my race keeping my eyes ever on you and your cross and resurrection, so that I may be a witness to your saving love for the whole world. Amen.**

Monday – Day 5

## Suffering

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:1-5 NRSV*

“Don’t walk onto the newly sown and rolled-out lawn,” the kindergarten teacher told us. Who was it that fetched the ball, thrown onto that newly sown lawn – thrown by another child? That was me! I had fetched the ball for my friend – and my friend betrayed me! The teacher sent me home and I knew I would get a hiding. Judas betrayed Jesus – how do you think Jesus felt?

When your mother speaks French (as my mother did) and not German like everybody else, you get mocked and your school mates torment you! Jesus was mocked and tormented by the soldiers and the crowd!

Your husband is in love with alcohol, instead of you, and you have a migraine that makes you feel as though your head is going to burst. How much more Jesus suffered when the soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head.

It is plain nothing what we endure through our life, when we compare our troubles with what Jesus suffered on the cross – and all for us. Jesus didn’t deserve to suffer – we do!

**Dear Lord our God, thank you for all the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ, who suffered for us on the cross. Lead us to forgive also those who trespass against us! Amen.**

## Suffering for Christ

*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:6-7 NRSV*

It is difficult for us living in Australia to appreciate what it means to suffer for Christ. Perhaps we have experienced the occasional remark criticising or ridiculing our belief but rarely has our faith been truly tested. Usually we think of the early centuries as the time when the followers of Christ were persecuted. However Christians in many countries today are still being harassed, tortured, and imprisoned for their faith.

Would our faith survive if we were forced to renounce it? According to Peter, the purpose of suffering is to test our faith and to prove that it is genuine. This is borne out by the testimony of people in many parts of the world who have had to suffer as a result of their Christian faith. Not only has their faith been proved genuine but it also has been strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit so that they are compelled to share the Good News with others despite the many trials they may encounter.

There is no doubt that the church is strengthened in times of suffering. In fact it is precisely in those countries where persecution exists that Christianity is experiencing remarkable growth. The danger we face in this country is that we can become too complacent about our faith, which becomes weakened, resulting in the mission of the Church being adversely affected.

**Dear Lord we pray for those who are suffering persecution in many countries of the world. Give them endurance as they continue to praise your name and to share your Word with others. We also ask you to give us courage to confess your name in those situations where we find it difficult to do so. Amen.**

Wednesday - Day 7

## Supported in Suffering

*And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 1 Peter 5:10 NIV*

Some years ago Dr John Kleinig said to me “Lutherans love to feel guilty” and I agree with him. There are folk who feel guilt and sadness especially in the Lenten lead-up to Good Friday and the passion of Christ; the sorrows and regrets of mortality seem to grow legs and take on a life of their own, particularly during this period.

When I look at the cross in the Lenten preliminary and then more particularly the Corpus Christi during the actual Passion days, I too walk the road to Calvary. I see the horrific pain and suffering Christ endured, and in that suffering I see the birth of a first-born child. I see the pain of a mother giving birth and the beginning of new and precious life: then of a mother grievously mourning the loss of that child in later years. I ask myself, “whose grief is greater, the *son* giving his life, or the *mother* watching her son lose his life?” Like many I subscribe to the dictum “a parent never expects to bury their child.”

Frankly, I cannot remotely imagine the trauma a condemned (or their family) must go through prior to, and at the time of public execution. That a condemned dies as an innocent paying the price for “the guilty” is totally beyond my rational understanding – yet it happened – praise God. Who is the guilty? It’s me, and yet I am forgiven and have received the promise of eternal life.

Peter’s words, “after you have *suffered* for a little while” – have I *suffered*? Do I live in Dafur? Am I refugee from Sudan? Have I lost family to tsunami, hurricane or pogrom? No. I know no suffering.

It is absolutely and utterly beyond my comprehension to understand what Christ underwent, endured for me. St Peter says, “after you have suffered a little while”. Bluntly, I do not know or understand what it is to really “suffer” – praise God. On a scale of one-to-ten where do I rate my suffering? The truth be known, it does not rate at all! How do you rate?

These days I sometimes feel I endure the rough and tumble of life but even through the Lenten period, traditionally a sombre time, I rejoice in that I have a mate who has gone before me to prepare the way.

**“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever.”  
Amen.**

## On the Way to Jerusalem

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Matthew 16:21 NRSV*

The disciples had just made a splendid confession of their faith, proving conclusively that they had the right, saving knowledge concerning Jesus their Redeemer. Christ therefore thought it the appropriate time to prepare them gradually for the great climax, the culmination of his work. They should now be able to hear the news.

Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit has led us to a growing faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, so that we too, are led to make a ‘splendid’ confession that Christ is our true Redeemer.

**Heavenly Father, ever remind us that the right knowledge of Jesus Christ, true faith, is your work and gift. Amen.**

## Don’t Let This Little “If” Scare You

*...and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:17 NRSV*

Sometimes that little word “if” gives me a little shudder. Things are never straight forward when there is an “if”; there is usually some condition, some hurdle, some uncertainty about what comes after it. Look at it here in this verse. “If we share in his suffering”. I’m not at all sure that I can meet that condition. I’ve had a few things that could, with a little stretch, be called “suffering”, but sharing in Jesus’ suffering? I don’t honestly feel that I have been there! Nor do I know of too many others who have suffered like that. How about you? So where does that leave you and me? Do we not, then, share in His glory?

I suspect that I am misunderstanding the intended meaning of that little “if” as it appears here. Does it have to be a condition? It makes good sense if we take it to mean something like “on the understanding that”, or “since it is the case that” or even “because”. St. Paul obviously wants to be sure to make a link between Christ’s sufferings and our being children and heirs of God. He knows that our being children and heirs wouldn’t otherwise just have happened.

So when the sign of Christ's suffering, namely the cross, is made over me, or I just see a cross, or as we again gather "together around the cross" this Lent, I am reminded that I do really share in Christ's suffering, already now. And that has deeply comforting and enriching implications for my sense of who I am and what is my future. I already am a child and an heir of God. So no shudders! Just peace and gratitude, and a little glimpse of glory.

**Lord Jesus, we honour you once more for the precious purpose achieved by your sufferings. Help us always to stand firmly and closely with you, and so to live life to the full because of who we are. Amen.**

Saturday – Day 10

## Be Not Ashamed

*For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. 2 Timothy 1:11-12 NRSV*

Paul suffered imprisonment for spreading the word of Jesus. In Timothy 2 he writes to Timothy to join him in Rome to continue Paul's work although Paul himself believes he may end his life in prison.

Faith is belief without proof. If we have incontrovertible proof, then there is no need or room for faith. Jesus in the garden and Paul in prison felt their faith being tested. They knew how it felt to face the dark side of life without faith. There is no easy road to faith worth travelling.

Our lives are filled with extremes: happiness and suffering, pain and joy, faith and its absence. We may not understand what is happening in our lives but we are only human and there are always multitudes of things we do not understand. We cannot know the mind of God, but we see his love for us in Jesus.

Our lives are brief but God is eternal.

**Dear Lord, guide us through life's uncertainties; make our faith stronger and assure us of your loving presence in all circumstances. Amen.**

## Who is My Enemy?

*“You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43-48*

NRSV

Who is my enemy? Is it perhaps the person at church with whom I do not agree over something and he/she likewise? Is it the neighbour who insists on playing his music too loud? Is it the terrorist who plans to murder me and my loved ones because we do not believe or follow his/her particular creed? Maybe, it's a robber who breaks into my home to steal my possessions? Or is it just someone whom I do not understand and therefore fear, and he/she feels the same about me?

My dictionary defines an enemy as a hostile person/nation/force, so that means any of the above could really be classified as an enemy, although perhaps in the second instance, I would be the enemy of my neighbour! How can I love these people as I should, as God does?

I have travelled to many places and cultures in the world, and always God makes the sun rise in the east and set in the west for everyone all over the world. Where there has been more than one culture living in the one town or country, I have found that each cultural group tends to “stick together” and live close to each other, feeling comfortable with the known and familiar, just as we see happening in Australia. And have you noticed how hard it is to make eye contact with someone of an obviously different culture so that you can say hello, or at least smile or nod to them? Much easier with “one of our own”, and I am sure all people feel the same!

I have met “good” people, nice people, friendly people, generous people, and some with whom I have felt distinctly uncomfortable and feared – the ones that my human nature calls “nasty and mean”. However, God still makes the rain to fall on the crops of the latter, as well as the “good” ones. God makes no distinction, because he in his perfect wisdom loves all of his creation. In his eyes, I am equal with the suicide bomber who blew up twenty people and ruined innumerable lives, or the drug addict, or the pastor or the pope, in fact, with every other person who has ever lived, is living, and will live!

That makes me feel very humble, because I know that I cannot love everyone as he does; and I never will in this body. Nor can I stop myself from “classifying” people into “good”, “bad”, “clever”, “stupid”, etc... I do, however, know that my shortcomings and sins are forgiven and overlooked in the saving grace that he has bestowed on me through the death of his son, the perfect atonement for my sins. Because of this, I love him and accept his trinity as the only way I can live here now, and in eternity; and if I love him and trust in his forgiveness, (indeed, that is all I can do!) he will consider me perfect and accept me and give me the freedom to at least try to understand people whom I consider enemies so that maybe I can learn to tolerate them if not love them as he does, for only he is God, only he is perfect.

**Heavenly Father, please lead me to understand all peoples, and open my mind and my heart to your love, your word, and your will so that I can learn how to accept those whom I consider my enemies. Be with those whom I do not understand, and hence fear and feel uncomfortable with. Father, bless them and anyone else who would be my enemy and take away their lack of understanding and any hardness and bitterness that they may harbour in their hearts. Help me Lord, and use me to demonstrate to them your love and your will so that we will all live peacefully together and come to repentance and forgiveness in your grace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Tuesday – Day 12

## Examples of Patience

*As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. James 5:10 NRSV*

When I began treatment for cancer, friends would kindly express sympathy and concern. I was grateful for their care but often felt that so many people suffered much more debilitating illnesses or had to endure tremendous hardships and sorrows, far greater than my own troubles. At least my children were all adults, and we had adequate health insurance and a comfortable home to live in. The days were no longer as crowded with countless demands of family and work. I actually had time to be less strong than I used to be!

It struck me at this time just how much I was affected by the experience and example of others who had gone through hard times. Friends (and even people I did not know well), came forward to share their stories; their patience and quiet courage was truly instructive. I observed firsthand, “patience in the

face of suffering” and was helped to shape the way I lived through my own difficulties.

This text asks us to consider the patience of the prophets in the face of the suffering they were called to endure. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jonah... and others, these were men raised up to proclaim God’s word to their people. Their lives were full of hardship and despair. Jeremiah asks “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?”

The prophets faced ostracism, imprisonment and even death in their dogged determination to tell the people the great things of God. Our own sufferings may be of a different kind, and though we’re separated from these men by thousands of years, their lives still speak to us. Their faithfulness and trust and patience and endurance stand as examples to us, for all time.

**Dear Lord, remind us of your constant presence in our lives, even in the smallest details. Help us to trust you when fears and troubles beset us. Amen.**

Wednesday – Day 13

## True Sympathy

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Hebrews 4:15*  
NRSV

How wonderful it is that we have a great high priest, Jesus, who was both truly man and truly God. As a result of Jesus’ humanity and earthly experience, he is able to sympathise with our weaknesses, to appreciate our human limitations and trials. And because of Jesus we can come to the very throne of God himself. How amazing that there we can always obtain compassion and mercy in relation to our weakness and sin. How awesome that here we find the grace that will help us. Praise God!

**Heavenly Father, thank you so much for Jesus. Please help me to more fully grasp the enormity of his sacrifice for us. Amen.**

## Don't Be Fearful

*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Revelation 2:10 NRSV*

It is so easy to feel afraid these days as we read the newspapers or watch the TV news. We can be afraid of developing cancer, catching bird flu, having a car/plane crash, travelling overseas and being in the wrong place when another terrorist attack happens, even letting our children walk/ride to school on their own. As I write this, a relative of mine is on his way to Iraq. We had a family BBQ to say goodbye to him. Each of us had the same unspoken fear. Will we see him again? Will something dreadful happen to him as it has to so many others over there?

We can be afraid because we have absorbed particular attitudes from our upbringing, from anxious or tentative parents, or we have heard or read about first hand experiences of war from friends or family members. When my children were very young, we “adopted” a Grandma who had come to Australia as a refugee after the War. Her memories were so terrifying that they gradually took over her whole being as she grew older, and she saw danger everywhere.

Succumbing to the fear that such thoughts and experiences can generate, can cripple us and push us into withdrawing from life itself, retreating into our homes, never doing anything different, going only to familiar places, not ever speaking to a stranger, and over protecting our children. Fear can literally close down our lives (as it did our Grandma's) and rob us of all that is good and wholesome unless we address it in some way.

I've found it helpful to name and admit my fears and concerns to myself, to talk about them with insightful friends or my pastor, and to reflect with someone about the attitudes picked up from the family. Most importantly I've been able to admit my fears and lack of faith to God and seek his help.

I've found that, as I do that, God's wonderful words “Do not be afraid” are more likely to be heard and his Spirit can begin to work within me. God's gift of grace and faith can comfort and empower me to carry on my life and plans, with all their uncertainties, knowing that he is there in front, behind, above, below and beside me. His Word assures me that he will bring me through the difficult times and give me the Crown of Life at the end, whatever happens.

**Lord, help us to name and share our fears with others, and especially with you, so that we may hear your words of encouragement, comfort and empowerment, and be able to live life to the full. Amen.**

Friday – Day 16

## Future Glory

*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. Romans 8:18 NRSV*

People do not look for tragedy – it comes. Here in this verse Paul speaks of persecution. Most of us, at some time, pass through long and seemingly endless periods of distress, where the future seems unknown. We might not believe it at the time, but there is always the potential to begin again. It is an oddity that we do live by looking to the future. So much more lies ahead.

There is in this verse the great contrast from present suffering to future glory. Speaking of eternity, we do not know what living outside the limits of time and space would be like. We only know there will be one joyful “now”. Many people have written their version in excited anticipation, scanning the horizon for signs of this wondrous glory. But our world is very dear, and we do not know what joy awaits us. If only we could see the world through the perspective of heaven. One day our lowly bodies will be transformed like his glorious body and we will see God as he is and live with him forever.

How great is the love of the Father that we are called heirs of God! What an inheritance!

**Thank you, Heavenly Father, for sending your Son who came to dwell with us, so we might dwell with you forever. And thanks be to the Holy Spirit who prepares us for this wonderful day when we will see you face to face in eternity. Amen.**

Saturday – Day 16

## When Life Hurts

*If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. 1 Corinthians 12:26 NRSV*

Christmas Day 2005. It's late in the evening now, family staying with us have all gone to bed and others to their own homes. Dishes have been washed and

put away, and apart from wrapping paper and bits of ribbon in some corners, the house is almost back to normal. The Christmas tree still glimmers softly, and the little nativity set looks peaceful with its tiny Baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph and angels and shepherds.

But my heart is aching tonight. This evening we heard that a friend, mother of one of our son's best friend, is facing death. Her cancer returned after three years and this time there will be no remission. We shared a meal with her and her husband not long ago, and her fragility was palpable, but there was still a sense of hopefulness. Now she has been given a time-line.

While it is her frail body that bears this illness, the suffering washes over so many others, the hurt and the pain spread so widely. I can't bear to think of her family's distress. Every Sunday I pass the church where her ageing parents still worship and know how mightily they've prayed for their beautiful daughter. Their hearts must be breaking.

My only comfort is that the Jesus whose coming we mark today, is suffering with my friend, whether she knows it or not. Jesus knows her every fear and every hurt; Jesus knows the anguish of her husband and family. And somehow I have to trust this Jesus, trust his mercy and grace, to guide my friend through this dark valley.

**O Jesus, walk with my friend and her family; sustain them and strengthen them, support and hold them close. Please make us more fervent in our prayers and help us to trust you more deeply. Amen.**

Monday – Day 17

## Enduring Trials

*My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4 NRSV*

I don't know if it's possible for me to say that enduring trials is "nothing but joy". Endure, I do, aware that God's presence and strength sustain and uphold me. When the testing time has passed, perhaps I can then glance backwards and see something of the maturing and strengthening effect of the trials. Whatever the deep waters and fiery trials were, I know that Jesus led me through them, and I can be thankful, and yes, even joyful!

It's a strange and wonderful thing that we can better see in others the effects of enduring testing times. Just think of those sweet saints who have borne griefs and sorrows and losses, sometimes beyond our imagining, and yet remain firm in their faith and trust. We share the pews Sunday after Sunday with these people, we know some as friends and relatives and neighbours. Just think of the people who over the years have inspired and strengthened you. Not heroes by worldly standards, but men and women whose quiet faith and steadiness has been an example and a source of encouragement in our Christian walk.

**Dear Lord, you are with us in good times and sad times, in all the passing moments of our life. Help us to be aware of your constant presence and love. Amen.**

Tuesday – Day 18

How Long, Lord?

*How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? Psalm 119:84 NRSV*

Whatever we are going through in our lives at this present moment has a beginning, now, (the present moment), and it will have an end. We most likely know the beginning of our current situation, whether it is for joy or trial. However, in the middle of our current situation, we can very easily lose sight of God's "big picture".

We get to a point when we say or think, "I can't take any more of this – I want *out* now, right this minute." It's okay to tell God that this is exactly how we feel – he has very broad shoulders, and we have the Psalmist's example, as well as Jesus' own example in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The word "endure" implies that the current difficulty is to be gone through, not avoided. So how do we encourage ourselves? We remember God's words to other people: "This is what the Lord says to you: do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army (of difficulty – *my words*). For the battle is not yours, but God's," (2 Chronicles 20:15b).

"The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them," Psalm 34:7.

**Lord, help me not to let you down as I go through this present difficulty. Help me to hold fast to you, my faithful God. Amen.**

## Don't Lose Heart

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3 NIV*

These verses conjure up pictures of great sporting contests – events where people watch athletes, sportsmen and women, performing at their best, striving to achieve the ultimate winner's prize. I think particularly of last year's AFL Grand Final – the enormous MCG packed with thousands of 'witnesses' to what they hope is a famous victory for their team. With so many witnesses, there is nowhere for any of the footballers to hide – everything they do will be seen, commented on and judged. The whole year's hard work, training and efforts culminate in this one day. How do the footballers respond? If they lose their concentration – begin to think of their own performance and not their role in the team, or take their eyes off the ball when competing – they risk losing sight of what their task is, of dropping or missing the ball and hindering rather than helping their team.

How can we forget the Swans' player in last year's Grand Final who made what seemed the unforgivable, fatal error in the last quarter by kicking across goal and having the ball land in the arms of an opposition player, who subsequently goaled and regained the lead for the Eagles? There was every reason at that point for the player and his team to feel defeated – to give up. But it was their continued striving and focus on the ultimate goal of winning, which produced a most inspiring response. And in the end it was a wonderful mark in the dying seconds of the game by a Swans player, who kept his *eyes fixed firmly* on the ball, which allowed them to achieve the prize of a premiership. Yes, there was pain along the way, but in the end the prize was considered much more important. The crowd, as witnesses to these moments, remember them and experience the joy and inspiration they produce.

What then of our lives as Christians? We too have many witnesses to how we act and respond, how we prepare ourselves and how we strive to live the life that has been *marked out for us*. Our performance will not last for 120 minutes like a football final – it lasts for a life time and there will be occasions when we will lose concentration or lose sight of Jesus. Along the way we will also be scrutinised and judged by others – criticised, excluded and ridiculed because

of our faith. Paul however, encourages us to keep on striving – to throw off all things that hinder us – all the distractions, all the quick fix solutions, all the trappings of modern society – and *fix our eyes* firmly on Jesus who provides the inspiration and the model of endurance. With Jesus as the focus, goal and object of our faith, our journey, whatever it brings, will not be in vain and we too will share in the future glory and the ultimate prize of eternal life.

**Dear Lord, we thank you for Jesus in whom our faith is built. Help us to keep our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus so that we may not grow weary and lose heart on our life journey. Instead, allow us to be examples of faithful perseverance, giving others a glimpse of the joy, hope and inspiration that Jesus provides for us, so they too may share in the ultimate prize of eternal life. Amen.**

Thursday – Day 20

Through Thick and Thin – God with us!

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters. Psalm 124:1-5 NRSV*

Ever get that feeling, that against all odds something has worked for you, far better than what you ever expected? It does happen sometimes, doesn't it! I guess that was how King David and his army must have been feeling after a certain battle against the Philistines when he penned the words of this Psalm. They were undoubtedly facing certain defeat against a much stronger enemy army. But the Lord was on their side and by some miracle they prevailed. This Psalm is the result. David and his army gave all, bringing about the outcome required for the Lord's glory.

God never promises us that as Christians we will never have problems, hard times or even persecution in our lives, but he does promise to be with us through all those times.

There are times when things seem to be completely against us, then circumstances take an unprecedented turn for the better. Things work out, maybe not the way we expected, but in hindsight we can see God's hand bringing about an even better result. In the long run it is to him that we should give all praise and glory.

Many times throughout the Bible, God promises us that he is for us and will never leave us or forsake us. The most outstanding example of this is the fact that God sent his Son into the world to pay the price for our sins by his atoning death on Calvary's mount. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God." (1 Peter 3:18)

**Dear Lord Jesus, during this Lenten season as we contemplate again your life, your sacrifice and suffering, help us to grasp that you did all this because God was on our side. That because of your suffering, death and resurrection, we could be born again, become children of God and cling to the promise of your presence with us, both in this life and in eternity. Amen.**

Friday – Day 21

## Not to Worry!

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith! Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Matthew 6:25-34 NRSV*

It’s all very well for Matthew to tell us to not worry or be anxious about our everyday challenges – he had no idea what we have to contend with in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. What might have been manageable then certainly does not apply today.

But is that really the case?

The nature of us humans is to always wallow in negative *ifs* – *if* it rained – *if* it did not rain – *if* the share market had risen – *if* this or *if* that. No doubt Matthew’s listeners also had their self important, but different, *ifs*.

However, the real constant for us, in both eras, has been the placing of our *ifs* into the hands of Jesus Christ, for him at his timing to perform the miracle of changing them to *whens*. For we surely have the gift of a free life - given to us on a plate and in a cup – when we allow his grace to envelop us.

Then, even the ‘troubles of today’ will be put into context and gladly accepted and acknowledged as being that part of our journey toward the Kingdom promised to all of us.

**Heavenly Father, we know that you freely offer to take into your care all of our tomorrow concerns so that we may enjoy the challenges of today, in the freedom we now have through Jesus’ death and rising. Amen.**

Saturday – Day 22

## A Firm Footing

*For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. Psalm 62:1-2 NRSV*

Events in life can leave us feeling unsure of our footing. We may be overwhelmed by commitments, just barely managing financially, on shaky ground with relationships, swallowed up by the quicksand of responsibilities, unsure of what matters most.

As confused and weak as we may feel, we must remember to lean on the Rock, our fortress, that will withstand any challenge or danger that life on earth may present.

This is a wonderful promise that we Christians can trust. No matter how hard it gets, how challenging life becomes, how much we may feel we are losing our footing – we can rely on God alone – he alone will save us, comfort us, love us – no matter what happens.

**Lord, the difficulties and sufferings of this world sometimes make us feel unsure, but we believe in your strength and your comfort always. Amen.**

Monday – Day 23

## I recognize my faults

*I recognize my faults; I am always conscious of my sins. Psalm 51:3 GNB*

This is a Psalm of David who knew he was a sinner but tells us so often that we have a loving and forgiving God. This is the God who gave us his Son Jesus to atone for us. Through his suffering and death and resurrection, he offers us full forgiveness of our sins and everlasting life, and we are assured of these blessings each time we partake of his Holy Supper.

We are all sinners. The world is full of sinners. Murderers, suicide bombers, child molesters, rapists – we all disobey God’s commandments in all kinds of ways. But thanks be to God who forgives all those who repent. Let us be sincere and truthful. Let us listen and speak words of comfort to those we visit. The Lord will help us to comfort those who mourn and those who are suffering family problems.

**As the Psalmist says, “I am always conscious of my sins” – please make us also conscious, Lord, so that we can come to you with open hearts to ask for your love and forgiveness. As we pray in the Lord’s Prayer – “Lord, forgive us our sins”... Amen.**

Tuesday – Day 24

## No Forwarding Address

*Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. Luke 15:11-16 NRSV*

A son leaves home and tells us he is never going to come back, for reasons only known to himself. The heartbreak is great. You can’t reason with him as there is no forwarding address! The mobile phone has been disconnected. Well, God, here I am – **help!**

The Lord guides me to Luke 15. Okay - what does that father do when the son asks for his half of everything? He just quietly and willingly gives him all that he asks for. He does not judge his son, he doesn’t complain, he just lets him go to find his own way.

As we read on, we learn this does not work for that son, and before long he ends up even without enough food. Yes, we give our children our standards,

but they will have to find their own. One can only hope that they will think of home and remember it as a good part of their lives.

**Dear Lord, I pray, protect my beautiful son along his journey, protect him from evil-doers and harm. Bless me and all parents that are missing a loved child. Guide us Lord, and bring joy to our hearts. Amen.**

Wednesday – Day 25

## Sweating Blood

*He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw away, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. Luke 22:39-44 NRSV*

To understand these verses better, we need to know what went before. Jesus had instructed his disciples to prepare the Passover meal in the home of a man they would meet who was carrying a jar of water. This in itself was most unusual. All happened just as Jesus had said, to the last detail – as it had so many times before. At the meal, Jesus was very solemn. He told his disciples that this would be his last Passover meal with them on earth. He said one of them would betray him, and there would be difficult times ahead.

Jesus particularly encouraged Simon to be strong when put to the test. What was the reaction of the disciples? They quizzed each other as to who would betray their friend; they bickered about who would be the greatest among them, and Simon promised loyalty, even to death.

So now they are at the Mount of Olives and Jesus entreats the group to pray that they will stay strong in faith. He draws away in his own private grief and anguish, knowing fully what is ahead. We know how the disciples responded to Jesus' plea – they went to sleep.

I am so like the disciples in every respect. It is for my pettiness, pride and pomposity that Jesus suffered that agony. Yet even with my fallibility, God has entrusted me to be his presence to those around me.

**Lord, be the source of all I think and say and do. Amen.**

## Blood, Sweat and Tears

*In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. Luke 22:44 NRSV*

When I was four years old and living in country NSW, a farmer friend of my father's, when asked how he managed to work a successful farm in years of drought, answered "I shed lots of blood, sweat and tears!" As a child, I took this literally and whenever we met this farmer, I would surreptitiously look for the blood as he sweated on a hot day.

My husband and I have, over the years, shed lots of **tears** following the loss of a baby, close friends and parents.

We have also lost **sweat** during severe illness and when having to make difficult decisions in our family life.

However, the **blood** shed by our Saviour and his love have enabled us to cope with and overcome life's sadness and pain. His presence and assurances continue unchanged in our rapidly changing world.

**Dear Jesus, thank you for your blood, sweat and tears shed for us and your caring love at all times in this life and beyond. Amen.**

## Cost of Discipleship

*Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him... Luke 14:25-29 NRSV*

What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ?

First, it means total loyalty and priority to Christ. With the literary tool of *hyperbole* (dramatic overstatement), Jesus emphasises the commitment that is required from all who want to become his disciple. To "hate" one's family doesn't refer to the actual emotion of hatred but stresses the point that one's love for Christ must be such that any earthly love is hatred in comparison.

Those who want to become Jesus' disciples need to be aware that this Kingdom is not another temporary or passing political or religious movement that they could support without risk or danger, and at will, leave aside when it no longer suits their schedule. This following Jesus is about a total life-change, a life-change that places Jesus at the centre. "*Discipleship is not periodic volunteer work on one's own terms and at one's convenience.*" (R. J. Karris). The securities of family bonds, personal dignity and life, and possessions may be at risk. One's plans will definitely be upset. One's comfort zone will certainly be stretched.

Second, whoever wants to follow him must carry his cross, must be prepared to endure the same fate that Jesus himself endured. One of the truly inspiring disciples of Christ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bonhoeffer, wrote:

*"If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity... We have then forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering...*

*Suffering then is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master... That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church... If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him. But if we lose our lives in his service and carry our cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is to be ashamed of Christ and his cross and all the offence which the cross brings in its train."*

This demanding word of Jesus cannot be tamed. Yet we need to see that it comes to us from the one who is totally, wholeheartedly committed to us, committed to our salvation, committed to the cross for us. his absolute and perfect giving of himself calls us into the embrace of God, to a giving of ourselves to him.

**Heavenly Father, you have not spared your only Son for us in order to restore our broken relationship with you. As you call us to follow you, help us to let go of all that keeps us from you. Please help us to become truly your disciples. In your name we pray, Amen.**

## Support Groups

*...we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 26:7-10 NRSV*

I joined a group of people meeting regularly together, who suffered from a particular health problem. They reached out and supported me at a time when I really needed their help. Over the years, as I improved, I was able to take on the leadership of the group, and help other people myself. People are crying out in pain, and we respond to their needs, giving both emotional and physical care. God is active through healing in this and many other areas.

In this text, God hears our voices crying out, and leads us to a place of support and comfort.

I am responding to cries for help, showing God's love by caring for the people in the support group.

**Lord, guide me and others to hear people's cries, and respond with care and support to their needs, and lead them to your loving healing and comfort. Amen.**

## Called – Not Because of our Wisdom

*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord". 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 NRSV*

There is so much to learn! And it is a wonderful thing to be able to use the minds that God has given us to do research and pursue studies. I heard of a

Year 12 student called Ben, who was extremely bright, but also a bit of a smart-alec. Mark, a friend of his father's, asked him what he wanted to do after he got his exam results.

"Oh, I'm going to Uni – I want to study law," he answered. "That's great," said Mark, "And what then?"

"Well, I want to practice law – go into a partnership, become a barrister and go right to the top." "Excellent," said Mark. "And what then?"

"I think I'll do really well at it. And I'll marry a beautiful girl and make heaps of money, and have a big house near the beach, and four children." "Wow," said Mark, "You've *really* made plans! What then?"

"Umm.....give my children the best education and get a bank balance with six figures." "And then, what?" said Mark.

"Well," said Ben, "I suppose that when I get old, I'll retire." "What then?" asked Mark quietly. Ben looked uncomfortable. "Then I'll die," he finally admitted. "And what then?" asked Mark.

That's the ever present question – "What then?" God, in his wisdom, has sent Jesus to suffer and die for us so that we may have eternal life. Have you settled, once and for all, that question: "And what then?"

**Heavenly Father, thank you for the wisdom you showed in giving us Jesus as our Saviour. Help us to live wisely, with eternity in view. Amen.**

Tuesday – Day 30

Christ Only!

*More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...Philippians 3:8-9 NRSV*

I am inspired and challenged when I read modern-day accounts of those who have lost or given up everything for the privilege of knowing and following Jesus today. Many of these stories come from countries where Christians are severely persecuted and suffer for their faith.

The apostle Paul, on reflection over all he'd accomplished in his life, considered everything "worthless" compared with the *preciousness of knowing Christ intimately*. Formerly he had taken great pride in his religious heritage, family blood line, theological knowledge of God's law and his zealous practice

of it, that he fanatically persecuted the church. *When he encountered Jesus, his world was dramatically turned “right side up”.* Knowing the power of Jesus’ love, serving him and making him known, became Paul’s passion, including fellowship and identity with Jesus’ sufferings when he himself suffered. As a result he also experienced the comfort, presence and resurrection power of Jesus in his life. With deep gratitude, Paul knew Jesus as his righteousness, his all in all. His relationship with God no longer depended on his former understanding.

Like Paul, I remember the time when I took great pride in my family’s religious heritage and the safety net of being “a good Lutheran”. However, Jesus challenged me with many unsettling times and questions in order to convert me to himself, sometimes in controversial ways. He wanted me to learn from him and his ways, rather than from some of the legalistic ways I had been indoctrinated in during my early years. I remember the incredible internal conflict, pain and fear of stepping out of the boat of my safe Lutheran identity as Jesus called me to himself, out onto unknown waters.

Everyone’s spiritual journey is so different, yet it is all about learning to know HIM. *How we can praise God for the safety net of his grace!* This safety net is always there to catch us when we slip up and fall.

All the tests and trials we encounter are designed so that we lean on Jesus, learn from him and get to know him more intimately. Without this intimacy, how will we survive the future shakings coming upon the earth before Jesus returns? May we hunger to know Christ as Paul did – hunger for the Living Word.

**Lord Jesus, You are the lover of our souls. Please enable us to surrender more and more to your compelling love and kindness. We want to know you more intimately. Amen.**

Wednesday – Day 31

## Tough Love

*Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the*

*peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12:7-11*  
NRSV

When I first reflected on this text, a number of thoughts and memories came to mind.

1. When I was still a tertiary student (many years ago) I spent three or four days in the Royal Adelaide Hospital with a poisoned hand. I was in a six-bed ward and in the bed across from me was a man who was in a great deal of pain. He had fallen several stories on a building site, had landed in a pile of reinforcing rods and had many broken bones. He was in lots of plaster and had heavy weights hanging from both legs. In his pain and delirium, he was often heard to mutter something about “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth”. When my pastor visited me one evening he was able to tell me that this man was a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He apparently believed that there was a direct link between his suffering and the Lord’s love, so that the greater the suffering, the greater was God’s love for him. I thought that his ideas were rather weird. Or was it that his faith was stronger than mine?

2. A few weeks ago I took a group of students to visit the Jewish Holocaust Museum in Elsternwick. They were both horrified and fascinated by the dreadful tales that two survivors were able to relate to them. Were the sufferings of this horrible period an example of God’s fatherly punishment? History shows a direct line between the Holocaust and the formation of the modern state of Israel, something that the Jewish people had been longing for for almost 2000 years. Did something good come out of this terrible piece of man’s inhumanity to his fellow man?

3. As a teacher I am sometimes saddened by my dealings with parents who immediately and almost automatically go to great lengths to defend their child from the consequences of their actions. It has been my observation that many parents are more concerned with being good friends with their children than they are with being respected by them, so that punishment is now seen as a very old-fashioned and irrelevant concept. I wonder whether some of the problems of our present society are related to this issue.

The text from Hebrews encourages us to see our sufferings as the normal part of being raised and cared for by a loving God. Do we often lose sight of this concept?

**Dear Lord, help us to see your love towards us even in life’s difficult times. The hard times remind us to lean on you and not to trust our own strength. When we are weak, then we are strong! Amen.**

## Sure of the Father's Love

*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16 NRSV*

I grew up knowing a loving God. Someone approachable, someone I felt close to, someone with whom I could share all my petty worries and insecurities. This is God as Father, and like any child I often take his interest in me for granted. But then I read a bible passage that uses a phrase like “approach the throne” and it suddenly hits me ... this is GOD we're taking about! This is the supreme being who created the whole universe and could snuff it (and me) out again with a single word. This majestic, awesome being really cares about me, lets me treat him like my Dad. He invites, even encourages, insignificant little me to come to him, not as a supplicant before a powerful ruler, but as a child confident of a father's love and acceptance. Amidst the trillions of people who have ever lived, he knows who I am and really worries about what happens to me. I am reminded anew what a great privilege that is.

**Lord, let me never take your love and concern for granted. Remind me daily that it is solely through your grace that I can call you Father and can call on you to help me any time, anywhere, and for anything, no matter how trivial. Amen.**

## Sharing His Love, Despite Difficulties

*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. Luke 6:22-23 NRSV*

Although having been raised Lutheran, attending Sunday school and confirmation etc., as an adult I was hesitant to admit publicly to having a faith. The hesitancy was primarily due to a fear of being rebuffed as I did not feel confident about expressing my innermost feelings and believed that my faith was weak.

An opportunity presented to attend an Alpha course and this indeed was a turning point for me with regard to this issue. It was the Holy Spirit together with the help, love and support of the people who did the course that I

learned that I was not alone with my feelings. As we studied God's Word our trust, understanding, love and confidence in each other grew.

I still have a way to go, however I am no longer so hesitant or fearful of admitting or expressing my faith. God has shown me that there are so many ways of sharing his love with others and the pure joy in doing so. I look forward to continuing the journey and trust him to lead me.

**Thank you Lord for always being present our lives and never forsaking us. We look to the day when we meet you in paradise. Amen.**

Saturday – Day 34

### When Words are Hard to Find

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Romans 12:15 NRSV*

Why is it so easy to share happiness but so difficult to share sorrow?

We rejoice at the birth of a child, or a grandchild. We are grateful and thank God that this child is born healthy.

And yet, we then have to share the sorrow of the parents who have just lost their son after he struggled with cancer for 3 years. It was their daughter who 18 months ago lost a child 5 days after birth, but now she has just given birth to a healthy daughter.

"Jim" said to me, "Just how much does one person have to bear?"

Very often we query why so many things happen to one family. And we really do not have an answer. We need to have compassion, be available as a good listener when people have a problem they need to talk about, and pray to God that he gives us the words to comfort people in times such as these.

**Gracious Father, help us to see that the power of your love is the best thing we can have in life. With the help of your grace assist us in our relationships with other people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Monday – Day 35

### We Won't Walk Alone

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. Psalm 23:4 NRSV*

I think I was three when my grandfather died. It was in the days when the funeral began in the home. The relatives gathered for the viewing and the closing of the coffin which was then processed to the church for the service; and then to the cemetery for the burial.

I must have been four when my grandmother died in her home as it was engulfed by a bushfire. Her Pastor was unable to conduct the funeral, such was the shock; but a neighbouring Pastor took the service using the text “Be still and know that I am God”.

My other grandfather died when I was about twenty-two but his wife lived for another seventeen years before her death at age ninety-seven.

My mother-in-law died aged eighty; my step-father-in-law at age eighty-four. My sister went to sleep at the wheel and took herself and three others to their deaths. My sister-in-law died in our home, and our daughter reclaimed her room after changing the sheets on the bed. My father died suddenly. My mother died when her body could no longer sustain her desire to continue to enjoy life’s many blessings.

I don’t think I look for comfort from rod and staff so much as taking enormous comfort in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Perhaps they are the same thing. It’s great to be able to rejoice in the many blessings we all enjoy – the pleasure in having children, and children’s children. We have lots of reasons to praise God and raise a glass in celebration; and when my time is up, I trust that I will still be able to say – I fear no evil for you are with me.

**Dear Lord, thank you for all the goodness and mercy that follows us all the days of our life. Amen.**

Tuesday – Day 36

He Hears our Complaint

*I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. Job10:1 NRSV*

How Job had been tried! The Lord had put Job forward to Satan as a person of great strength who would not turn away from his Lord in bad times. The testing of Job came: he lost his animals, his servants, and then his sons and daughters. After this, his body became covered in painful sores.

Yes, Job got angry, wishing he had never been born, but at no time did he blame his Lord for all his troubles.

Job is a great example for us when we have our problems, however small or large they may be. While we might feel angry or hurt, we can come to our Lord through prayer, seeking his comfort and guidance in our dark times, and asking for strength so we don't blame God for problems of our own human making.

Just as the darkness of Christ's passion and death became the resurrection, so too will God get us – and others who suffer for his sake - through times of darkness.

God didn't let Job down (42:10) – and he won't let us down. Take with you the strength of Job (1:21) and make these words your own in difficult times:

**The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be blessed. Amen.**

Wednesday – Day 37

## Patience

*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. James 5:7-8 NRSV*

I still remember with a wry grin an occasion when I impatiently stabbed at the button on the hand dryer in some public toilets, expecting instant results. Nothing. After a few more frustrated attempts I actually stopped to read the writing engraved in the button: "Press for one second".

Being patient for the harvest, waiting for things to come to fruition; it doesn't come easily for us humans. More and more we want things to happen now, today ... or even yesterday if it were possible.

Don't save up – take it home today, put it on credit card and pay interest, or look into that 'buy now pay nothing until 2020' scheme. Or why are those test results taking so long to complete – I want to know what I've got and how to treat it so I can get on with my life. Or why is it taking so much time to get my thoughts together for this devotion – I've got plenty of other stuff I need to get done.

Yet again, God reminds us that his timing is different to ours. He sees the bigger picture and calls us to be patient in waiting for him to paint in all the details. Whatever we are waiting for, including the coming of the Lord and the end of all waiting, God has it in hand and it is part of his perfect plan for us.

As always, God equips us for whatever he asks of us. He not only calls us to be patient – he *gives* us patience. As we live and strengthen our hearts in a daily relationship with Jesus – seeking to be close to him through God’s Word, through worship, through Holy Communion – we are freely given all the fruits of the Spirit, including patience.

**Dear Jesus, help me to lead a patient life, trusting in you day by day.  
Amen.**

Thursday – Day 38

## A Place for Us

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ John 14:1-4 NRSV*

Brushing my teeth early on Sunday morning, listening to “Singers of Renown”, I heard that beautiful Negro spiritual, Goin’ Home. It’s so beautiful; the words so filled with longing for the time when there would be a final “going home”. Today’s reading has Jesus tell us that he has gone to prepare a place for us, a home for us. Jesus’ words make me think of the joy of coming home to One who loves us. Listen to the words of this song -

Goin’ home, goin’ home, I’m a goin’ home’	Goin’ to roam no more!
Quiet-like, some still day, I’m jes’ goin’ home.	Mornin’ star lights the way,
It’s not far, jes’ close by,	Restless dream all done;
Through an open door;	Shadows gone, break ‘o day,
Work all done, care laid by,	Real life jes’ begun.
Goin’ to fear no more.	Dere’s no break, ain’ no end,
	Jes’ a livin’ on,
Nothin’ lost, all is gain,	Wide awake, with a smile
No more fret nor pain,	Goin’ on and on.....
No more stumblin’ on the way,	Goin’ home, goin’ home,
No more longin’ for the day,	I’m jes goin’ home. . .

So many songs, poems, dramas and novels are about 'going home' or home-coming. The words above see home as the place of loving reception, the place of welcome and peace, where burdens and sorrows can be laid down. No more stumbling, no more longing – shadows gone, morning breaking . . . and real life just begun.

Home evokes powerful feelings in us, sometimes deeply comforting, sometimes deeply confronting. Home is far more than shelter. It's about belonging and being accepted. For all our love of home, it's good to remember that we are strangers and pilgrims in this world.

I take comfort from seeing the coffin in the church at funerals. We bring our dear ones for the last time to the house of God, their spiritual home. It is deeply affecting to see our loved ones being borne out – their final pilgrimage from this holy place. The new life promised by Jesus, has already begun – in that glorious home already prepared!

Jesus is making ready to welcome us home. He tells us to trust in God and also in him. He tells our hearts not to be troubled because when our time comes to leave this life, he himself will come and take us to be with him in his heavenly home. There will be room enough for all in that eternal dwelling place.

**Dear Jesus, help me to trust your promise that you are already preparing my eternal home and that when my last hour comes you will take me there. Amen.**

Friday – Day 39

## Change is Life

*Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will*

*see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. John 16:17-22 NRSV*

Time  
to go,  
to say farewell,  
to send them out,  
together

Thank you Jesus for saying farewell, for showing the way to follow. Your words are true. The way of change though paved with anxieties, confusion, ..... suffering even death still opens into joy, through hope in our Abba.

Not  
to be  
without a friend  
but, within the Spirit,  
community

Thank you Jesus for the Breath of G'd which resides among us yet goes where ever he wills inviting us to follow.

Go!  
Tell all!  
of the jubilee,  
a Kingdom: a Future.  
Now!

Thank you Jesus for G'd's message "to proclaim, to live as in his Kingdom now". Come to us, all you who are troubled and weighted down with care, and we will give you rest. [response to Mat 11:28]

Love,  
Jesus' gift  
to givers given  
that none be left  
without.

Thank you Jesus for G'd's gift to see, with a bounteous love for humankind, that lets us see with a parent's eye to plead to fight for and celebrate with the powerless, the anawin.

Who?  
will go  
the chosen way  
seeding in Satan's land  
Compassion.

Thank you Jesus for showing us G'd's way through this life. A way that seeks the pearl of good in all. A way that seeks to bring change, in hope that all may, at least, even glimpse the kingdom now.

All  
that some  
may ever see  
of G'd's Good-news is  
us..

Thank you Jesus for your trust, a trust that  
challenges us to write upon this world Good-  
news. G'd give your church the will to go beyond  
the institution and really be your open Kingdom  
foyer that welcomes all G'd's kin within. That  
there be neither Jew nor Gentile: neither male or  
female: that as they are all may enter in.

Note G'd is used in respect of the Jewish tradition from which scripture  
comes. © 2005

Saturday - Day 40

### Jesus Gives up His Spirit

*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:28-30 NRSV*

It is amazing to read about the physical death of Jesus. Jesus the MAN. Jesus, just like us. Dying from his wounds. A thirsty Jesus, asking for relief from his suffering!

It is a comfort to know that God, as Jesus, was prepared to experience pain and death as a human, so that we can be reconciled, once more, in our relationship to him. And when Jesus died, he gave up his spirit, just as we will, when we die. And we know that this isn't the end of the story. Death was overcome so that we, because of Jesus, no longer need to fear death because it is just the beginning of a new life with him in eternity.

**Lord, thank you for becoming a man. Thank you for suffering and dying that I might be saved. Help me to focus on you when times are dark knowing that, through your own experience, you understand. Amen.**