

5 October 2008

“Grace to Help in Time of Need”

Reading: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

About fifteen years ago I received one of those phone calls no pastor ever likes to receive. The nineteen-year-old son of an outstanding couple in our church had been killed in a car accident. As I drove up through beautifully manicured gardens to their home in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, I wondered why this should happen to them. There I found a calm but devastated couple, reeling under the shock. They were courageous as wave after wave of visitors came to express their sympathy. It is not easy to know what to say under such circumstances. I was at a loss for words. My own son was about the same age; he was alive and I could only imagine how I would have felt had I been in their shoes.

I must confess that I wondered why God had allowed this. As I saw the pain in their eyes, I thought how unfair life seems at times. What purpose could possibly be served by such a tragedy?

About eight years later, I received another of those dreaded phone calls. This time, it seemed worse. A couple had recently begun attending our church. Their eighteen-year-old daughter had commenced her university studies at the University of Cape Town. She and two of her close friends, who had been together since elementary school, had been involved in a horrible accident. All three of them had lost their lives. Their grief was almost tangible. They ran through the normal gamut of disbelief, anguish and recrimination.

But that accident was the catalyst for the establishment of a Bereavement Support Group, which is still in existence to this day. It is one of the most meaningful ministries I have ever seen. People who have lost spouses and children, often in tragic circumstances, come there to work through their pain. It is a safe place. They often vent. At the heart of that ministry are a very understanding couple--the couple who lost their son in that accident.

I was asked to address that group on the subject: “A Biblical Perspective on Suffering.” I have done some work on that subject, which C S Lewis describes as *The Problem of Pain*. I know the subject and I did my best, but I could never accomplish what those who had passed through the valley of suffering could accomplish.

Those of us who have not been there can try to understand; those who have been there do understand. It's as though some invisible bond unites them. It may be conveyed by a look or a hug, the indefinable sense that he or she has "been there." It is, if you like "understanding from the inside." Nobody can help more than those who have had first-hand experience.

As the prefix suggests, "sympathy" is the capacity to feel with a person. It is, if you like, mental participation in another person's trouble. "Empathy" is more. It is, according to the Oxford dictionary, "the power of projecting one's personality into and so fully comprehending" the person's situation.

The question we may well ask is this: "Can God understand our situation?" He is God and therefore his knowledge is infinite. But can he really *understand*, not only with the comprehensive knowledge of omniscience, but with the empathetic knowledge of personal experience? As far as our Writer is concerned, the answer is a resounding "Yes."

Rather than engaging in a philosophical discussion on the relationship between knowledge and understanding, he points to Jesus. We who honour him as our Lord and Master may have missed something here. For too many of us, Jesus is our Saviour in the sense that, as the eternal Son of God, he effected salvation for us. We acknowledge his humanity, but do not realize how important it is to our salvation and our ongoing relationship with him. You see . . .

I. IT CERTAINLY HELPS US TO KNOW THAT JESUS WAS GENUINELY HUMAN.

- A. According to the Writer, he needed to be genuinely human in order to be a suitable high priest.

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was (5:1-4).

- B. The virgin birth is the way God chose for his Son to become man. Yes, it was unprecedented and unrepeatable. It underscores his uniqueness, but it did not insulate him from normal humanity.¹
- C. Look at just how human he was.
1. He not only had a real body, but was subject to the same physical limitations that we are. He had to grow and develop. He felt fatigue and hunger and thirst. In terms of his personality, we encounter the full gamut of human emotions: sorrow and joy, anger and surprise. Clearly he was not omniscient while here on earth.
 2. I think it was A H strong who said, "Everything that can be said of man, *as man*, can be said of him, but not everything that can be said of man, *as **sinful** man*, can be said of him."
- D. I remember I conversation I once had with a martial arts expert. He looked no different from you or me, but he had reached the top level in his field. That meant he could not only defend himself, but also deliver a lethal blow and eliminate an opponent. I mused on what might happen if a thug, after his wallet, threatened him and he unleashed the array of karate blows upon the unsuspecting mugger. He informed me that he would probably not resort to his karate in such a situation. It's not that he would forfeit the ability to do so; simply that he would choose not exercise the prerogatives at his disposal.

Jesus never ceased to be divine, but took a conscious decision not to exercise the prerogatives of his divinity. Consider, for example, two key moments in his life:

1. At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and a voice from heaven declared: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Immediately after this he went into the desert of Judea and fasted for forty days. At the end of the period, when he was hungry, and acutely aware of his humanity, Satan tempted him. With characteristic subtlety, he said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Instead of asserting his deity or demonstrating it, he

¹Jesus was not a demigod or a "tertium quid," (a third something), a being somewhere between God and man.

subjected himself to God's Word, countering the tempter by quoting from Scripture. "It is written . . ."

2. We see this again at his arrest. When Peter attempted to defend him, he healed the man who had been attacked and reprimanded his belligerent disciple, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal twelve legions of angels." Usually we refer to this statement to emphasize that Jesus did not have to die for us but chose to do so, and it certainly does underscore that point. But we miss something important. Jesus did not say, "With a click of my finger, I could incinerate my opponents." The very fact that he said that he could ask his Father indicates not only his submission to the Father, but also the way in which he lived. He would not fall back upon his omnipotence. If he was going to do anything to prevent his arrest, his action would take the form of a prayer to his Father. That is how he conducted his life.
- E. Many within the church have not really accepted his humanity. In fact, the early church probably had greater difficulty accepting his genuine humanity than it did accepting his deity.
- F. Part of the reason for this is that we are uncomfortable with mystery. But how can it be otherwise. If we affirm that the eternal Son of God, who is co-equal with the Father, actually became human and lived among us, we surely do not expect to be able to understand this or to reduce it to a simple formula.
1. In an attempt to do so, some imported ideas from Greek philosophy but their proposals were unacceptable. In the fourth and fifth centuries the church wrestled in a vain attempt to explain exactly how one person could be genuinely divine and also human. The sometimes unedifying story is full of intrigue excommunications. Ultimately, the church settled for a paradoxical definition. Each phrase is crafted
 2. In 451, a general Council at Chalcedon pronounced on the subject. Here is a key portion of the paradoxical formulation:

. . . one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures (divine and human), without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union,

but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person . . .

Yes, it certainly helps us to know that Jesus was genuinely human.

II. IT ALSO HELPS IF WE REALIZE THAT HIS SUFFERING WAS WORSE THAN OURS WILL EVER BE.

- A.** We read that “he was tempted in every way just as we are.” Donald Hagner explains that this does not mean that he faced every single temptation that has ever been experienced: “The full humanity of Jesus means that he experienced the full range of human temptations (rather than every specific manifestation of human temptation).”
- B.** William Barclay helps us here (and I quote):
 “The fact that Jesus was without sin necessarily means that he knew depths and tensions and assaults of temptation which we never know and never can know. So far from his battle being easier, it was immeasurably harder. Why? For this reason--we fall to temptation long before the tempter has put out the whole of his power. We are easily vanquished; we never know temptation at its fiercest and its most terrible, because we fall long before that stage is reached. But Jesus was tempted as we are--and far beyond what we are. For in his case the tempter put everything he possessed into the assault, and Jesus withstood it.”

It's like a pain threshold. Mercifully, we can only take so much pain before we faint. If that threshold is passed, we lose consciousness.

So, his suffering was every bit as real as ours and greater than ours could ever be. This leads us to a third observation:

III. IT HELPS IF WE UNDERSTAND THE EXTENT TO WHICH HE EMPATHIZES WITH US.

- A.** Back in chapter 2:17, the Writer explained that Jesus “had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”
- B.** Perhaps the strongest statement of this is found in chapter 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” There is a figure of speech

which we sometimes use to emphasize a point. It is called litotes. We use it for emphasis. Instead of saying, "I appreciate your hard work," one may say, "I am not unmindful of your hard work." When Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel . . ." he was actually stating his commitment to the gospel in the strongest possible way. That's what happens here. The double negative states the truth in the no uncertain terms (litotes again): "We do **not** have a high priest who is **unable** to empathize with our weaknesses . . ."

- C. On the beautiful Hawaiian island of Molokai, there is a grave that is highly valued by the residents.



All that is buried there is the right arm of a Belgian man by the name of Jozef de Veuster. He died over a century ago, but in 2005, in polling conducted by the Flemish Public Broadcasting Service, he was honoured with the title *De Grootste Belg* (The Greatest Belgian) throughout the history of Belgium. How is it that only his right arm is buried in that grave on the Island of Molokai? In 1936, the Belgian government insisted that his body be brought back to Belgium. Some of the residents of Molokai pleaded with the Belgian authorities to send the body back to the island. In a sincere but strange gesture, they severed the right arm from the disinterred corpse, and returned it to the islanders.

Why all this fuss? Well de Veuster, or **Father Damien**, as he was called, had asked for permission to go and minister to a leper settlement that had been established on the northern side of the island. He cared for the lepers who had been banished and virtually abandoned. He built a church and served the lepers in every way, preaching, counselling, dressing ulcers, building homes and beds and even coffins, and digging graves. Under his leadership, shacks became painted houses, working farms were organized, and schools were erected.

He treated those lepers with befitting respect. At the regular services he would commence his sermons with the words, "My fellow believers . . ."

One day, as he went about his evening ritual of soaking his feet in very hot water, he could not feel the heat. He realized that he too had become a leper. The next morning, he mounted the pulpit as usual, and greeted his parishioners as usual, except that this time there was a difference. Instead of his customary, "My fellow believers," he commenced with the words, "My fellow *lepers* . . ." He continued to serve, but the leprosy ravaged his body and four years later he died a leper at the age of forty-nine.

When Bishop Maigret had presented Damien to the colonists, he described him as "one who will be a father to you, and who loves you so much he does not hesitate to become one of you; to live and die with you." How true those words proved to be.

Well, God's Son came to our more extensive leper colony. He walked among us and cared for us, but he never did contract our leprosy. "He was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin" (4:15). "'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:22-24). Or, as Paul says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21).

Yes, he was genuinely human, his suffering was worse than ours could ever be, and he empathizes with us in our weaknesses. In view of all this:

IV. IT HELPS IF WE TAKE HIS INVITATION SERIOUSLY.

A. “Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16).

B. He understands.

1. Have you ever been totally rejected by the citizens of the town in which you were raised?

Jesus was. In fact, they drove him out of town and wanted to throw him off a cliff. “No prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Luke 4:28-29).

2. Have you experienced ridicule and cynicism from members of your own family?

Jesus' own brothers spoke disparagingly to him. On one occasion they brought Mary to him. It seems they wanted to dissuade him from the course he was taking. Not too nice when your family turn against you! (Mark 3:31-35; John 7:3-5).

3. Have you ever been let down and forsaken by friends?

How must Jesus have felt when the disciples fled for their lives from the Garden of Gethsemane, after pledging loyalty to him? And when he heard the rooster crow and saw knew that Peter had denied ever having known him?

4. Have you ever felt that the way God has chosen for you is completely unbearable?

Jesus came to the point for which he had prepared, only to discover that the cup of sin he was about to drink was unimaginably horrible and seemed completely unpalatable. It is as though the bony fingers of death reached into the very soul of the one who is the source of life holding it in a vice-like grip. Everything within him revolted at the thought. He seemed to be in deep distress. His soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death (Matt 26:38). Here we read that “he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears” (5:7).
Gethsemane was unimaginably horrible!

5. Have you ever been betrayed by a close friend?

Imagine a man with whom you had spent years of your life, and alongside whom you had reclined only hours before, approaching you and greeting you warmly with the kiss in order to identify you to those who have come to arrest you with a view to having you executed! *That must have hurt.*

6. Have you ever felt such anguish and come to the end of yourself, so much so that it had the physical effect of causing you to sweat blood?

“Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22: 44).

7. Have you ever felt that God is a million miles away as a deep darkness envelops you on account of sin?

Hear his cry of dereliction on the cross after three dismal hours of physical and spiritual darkness: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46)

“He has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (4:15).

Conclusion

Whether it is a temptation that you find it difficult to resist, a deep hurt that causes great sadness in your life, a problem that seems insurmountable . . . Whether you'd have to say, “I have come to the end of myself”. . . Whether you need mercy because you have sinned, or grace to help in time of need, you can approach the throne of grace with confidence. And there you will find one who empathizes with our weaknesses. Why not do so right now?