

Sunday 27th September 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Romans 8:31 – 32, 38 – 39
Theme: “Love changes everything!”

“Let God’s love for you change your life, totally and utterly!”

Introduction:

Have you ever seen Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Aspects of Love*. Jenine and I saw it a long time ago in Melbourne. I don’t remember much about the musical itself, except that the theme song was very stirring to the emotions. The words of the opening verse goes like this:

**Love, love changes everything:
hands and faces, earth and sky.
Love, love changes everything:
how you live and how you die...
Nothing in the world will ever be the same...
Love will never never let you be the same.**

Of course, the song was written with reference to two people being “in love”.... But this love song, like most love songs, can also be sung in part with God’s relationship to us in mind.

When we see clearly that God passionately loves us, each of us, then the way we look at life and death and everything is changed. When we really appreciate just how much God loves us, then “nothing in the world will ever be the same”.

And the way that we come to appreciate that God truly loves us, each of us, and that God is “for us” is by looking at Jesus, God’s Son become a human being... (*John 1:18; cf. Mark 1:40-42; Luke 7:11-17; John 4:1-42*).

And more particularly, by looking at Jesus on the cross. What does Paul say in our text?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He did not even spare His own Son, but offered him up for us all (*Rom. 8:31-32*).

That’s how much God loves us: enough to give up His own Son for us.... Enough to allow His own Son, Jesus, to suffer and to die as a criminal on a cross “for us”, for our sake!

Like Abraham in the Old Testament, God is willing to sacrifice His own son. Abraham's willingness to do this showed his love of God and his faithfulness to God. God's willingness to do this shows His great love for us, each of us, whom he created (*the use of the word "spare" by Paul recalls the word's use at Gen.22:16*). As John puts it, 'God **so loved** the world that he gave his only Son...' (John 3:16).

But more than that, as the New Testament writers confess, when Jesus was suffering on the cross for us, God Himself in a very real way was suffering there for us (e.g., *John 1:1,14,18; 20:28; Matt. 1:23; Col. 2:9*). God didn't just send His Son to "do His dirty work", so to speak. When Jesus, God's Son, suffered on the cross, God Himself was suffering there for us. Or as Paul puts it elsewhere:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself
(*2 Cor. 5:19*).

I want this morning to paint a series of pictures in your minds which I hope will help you better understand the love of our God for us, and the lengths to which He was prepared to go out of love for us.

Picture 1)

The first picture that I want to share with you is one that I share rather reluctantly, because it is a horrifying, awful picture, but it is one that reminds us of the horrifying, awful thing that God was prepared to do for us, out of love for us.

The picture is found in a book that the Hungarian Jew, Elie (*Eliezer*) Wiesel about his boyhood experiences in the World War two concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. Appropriately, it is called simply *Night*. In this book he writes of the horrifying things he saw there and the flames, which he writes, "consumed my faith forever".

Perhaps the most horrifying experience of all, that he writes about, was when the guards tortured and then hanged a young boy, "a child with a refined and beautiful face", a "sad-eyed angel". Just before the hanging, Elie heard someone behind him whisper, "Where is God? Where is he?"

Thousands of prisoners were forced to watch the hanging, and forced to watch the young boy slowly die: because of his light weight, it took the boy half an hour to die. Behind him as he watched, Elie heard the same voice say "Where is God now?" And Elie writes, "And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is he? He is here – he is hanging here on this gallows'"

(Stott, Cross of Christ, p. 334-335).

One commentator says, “His words were truer than he knew” (*Ibid.*). For that’s exactly what our God did for us. He was prepared to hang on the gallows, so to speak, and to slowly suffer and die for us.

That’s how much God loves us! ...Enough to suffer and to die for us in Jesus! The picture of that young boy dying on the gallows in that concentration camp reminds us of what our God was prepared to do for us, out of love for each and every one of us.

The God who made the universe and us loves us so much that He was prepared to suffer and die a horrendous death on a cross for us, in order to rescue us....

Picture 2)

The second picture I want to share with you is a made-up story, a modern day parable. It’s a story that is based on a drama written by an East German pastor in 1948. It is variously entitled “A sheltered life” or “The long silence”. It goes like this (*cf. Stott, p. 336-337*).

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God’s throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame but with hostility to God.

“How can God judge us!? How can he know about suffering?” snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open her sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. “We endured terror...beatings... torture...death!”

In another group, a Negro boy lowered his collar. “What about this?”, he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. “I was lynched, for no crime except being black!”

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes spoke up and said, “Why should I suffer? It wasn’t my fault”.

And out across the plain, there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and the suffering he had permitted in the world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all

was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each group sent out a leader chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a negro, a thalidomide child, an aborigine, an illegitimate child, a person from Hiroshima, and someone from a Siberian slave camp. In the centre of the plateau, they consulted with each other.

At last they were ready to present their case. It was quite simple. Before God could qualify to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man!

But because He was God, they set certain safeguards to be sure that he could not use his divine powers to help himself.

They said:

Let him be born in a despised and oppressed race.

Let him live in poverty and work with his hands.

Let him know the stigma of bastardy – let the legitimacy of his birth be suspect.

Let him stand for justice and freedom at a time when they are totally disregarded and repressed, *and let him suffer for it.*

Let him know what it is to be alone.

Let him be misunderstood by all who know him.

Let him receive hatred, scorn, and abuse in return for love.

Let him be betrayed by his closest friends.

Let him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced court, and sentenced by an unjust judge.

Let him be tortured.

Let him be stripped naked, beaten, mocked, and humiliated, and

Let him die!

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the great throng of people.

When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew...God had already served his sentence.

Picture 3)

My third and last picture that I want to leave you with this morning in order to help you better understand the love of God for us and the lengths to which He was prepared to go out of love for us comes from a book on “suffering” and “pain” by Philip Yancey entitled *Disappointment with God....*

At the very end of the book, Philip Yancey tells a story from his own experience. He tells of how when visiting his mother, she, as mothers as want to do, had pulled out a box of photos.

And in that box was a crumpled baby photo of him as a baby, with his name on the back. He asked his mother why she had kept that crumpled photo when she had so many other undamaged ones.

She explained to her son that she had kept this photo because this was the photo that had been wedged in front of his father as his father had laid, dying from polio, in an iron-lung during the early 1950s. At that time, polio was regarded much as COVID is now. Other than Philip’s mother, people weren’t allowed in to visit. As Philip Yancey’s father had slowly died at the age of only 24 years, his muscles weakened from paralysis so much so that he needed an iron lung to breath for him, Philip Yancey’s father had stared at pictures of his wife and this two sons.

Philip Yancey writes:

When my mother told me the story of the crumpled photo, I had a strange and powerful reaction. It seemed odd to imagine someone caring about me whom, in a sense, I had never met. During the last months of his life, my father had spent his waking hours staring at those three images of his family, my family. There was nothing else in his field of view. What did he do all day? Did he pray for us? Yes, surely. Did he love us? Yes. But how can a paralysed person express his love, especially when his own children are banned from the room?

I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few

links connecting me to the stranger who was my father, a stranger who died a decade younger than I am now....

I mention this story because the emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of love. *Someone is there*, I realized. *Someone is watching life as it unfolds on this planet. More. Someone is there who loves me.*

You know, we have a crumpled photo of sorts. It's the image that we have of our God being crucified on a cross for us. And it is as we think about the cross of Jesus that we are aware, fully and completely, of just how much God loves us!!

How do we know that God is "for us" and that God loves us in the midst of our pain and suffering? By looking at the cross of Jesus!!

John Stott writes in his book *The Cross of Christ*.

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?

I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolised divine suffering (*Ibid.*, p.335-336).

In the light of God's love for us on the cross, everything **is** changed! Nothing is ever the same again once you see God's offering of His Son, part of His very Being, as the climatic expression of His love for us (*Rom. 8:32*).

Life, troubles, suffering, and death are looked at differently, because we know by looking at the cross that God is “**for us**”. Suffering, we still can’t fully understand, but we know nevertheless that as we go through suffering we have our loving God at our side, working for good through even our sufferings. As Paul puts it a little earlier:

We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

And death.... Well, not even death can separate us from God who passionately loves us! Listen again to how Paul finishes off our Bible reading and that great chapter eight of this letter to the Christians in Rome: **I am certain that nothing can separate us from God’s love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, nether the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).**

Conclusion:

Maybe like me you’ll be singing and humming the song “Love changes everything” in the next days and in the next week.

**Love, love changes everything:
hands and faces, earth and sky.**

**Love, love changes everything:
how you live and how you die...**

**Nothing in the world will ever be the same...
Love will never never let you be the same.**

For that’s what knowing *through Jesus* that you are loved and valued by God does: “it changes everything”, and as a result, “Nothing in the world will be ever be the same”.

And may the peace, which God gives and which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.