

Pako Evening Service: 03/07/2016

Scripture Readings: Isa 53; John 19:17-30; Sermon: "Our Suffering Saviour."

Beloved people of God,

Over recent months and years, we have seen much suffering and trouble in our world. In fact, when I think about it I have to be careful, for it tends to depress me. I think of some African nations that we hardly hear about, yet they are torn with civil war and as a result there is much suffering, not least being poverty. I think about the recent conflicts and wars in my short life time, Vietnam, Iraq, tensions with Iran, Middle East conflicts, not just between Israel and the Palestinians, but with Lebanon, the Hezbollah, and Egypt.

Since 9/11, we have seen conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan, tensions with Iran and North Korea, and now more recently ISIS and the terrible atrocities that they perform. What untold suffering as resulted from all these conflicts. We can even recall natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, Nuclear Reactors melting down and again what suffering. On personal levels, we have personally made mistakes that causes division. We have seen sickness, the loss of loved ones, marriage break downs, and so many other things.

So this evening I ask, how do you respond when suffering knocks at your door or your neighbour's door? Do you throw your hands up in despair? Perhaps you are one of those people that get angry or just drown in self-pity! Perhaps you feel that the world is against you and it isn't fair! Well, this evening my prayer is that you may not only know the reason for the suffering we have in this world and in our own lives, but that you may also give hope and a positive response to the suffering we see in this world.

As Christians we have this great hope for we know that at the end of suffering there is still a loving God who has met our greatest need in Jesus Christ. We know, whether in life or in death, body and soul, we belong to Him and that there isn't anything in all creation that can separate us from Him. All this was accomplished, because God in his great love sent our Saviour to suffer for us! And because of that, we know that despite illness, despite frailty, despite persecution or famine or hardship or even death, eternity awaits us in glory.

Now some may see that as a disappointing answer, or just typical Christian rhetoric, yet it is in Jesus' suffering that we find the clue to all suffering and our only hope of ever getting beyond this valley of tears. People who say that they cannot believe in a God that allows suffering and pain in the lives of nice people, conveniently forget that God, the Creator of all, made everything very good and that He didn't design suffering.

It was only when man disobeyed his Creator that humanities misery and suffering started. It would have been infinitely worse if God had said, "You started it, you fix it and never intervened." In fact, history shows that man has been trying to fix it for centuries and with no success. Some may say and think that man is improving, but did you know that in the previous century, there wasn't one day when there wasn't war somewhere on this planet and we haven't done any better in this century!

The problem humanity faces is that it cannot find a lasting answer to the problem of suffering! Sure we may live a little longer and healthier than our forefathers, but that hasn't answered the problem of suffering. In fact, it could easily be argued that it has only prolonged the suffering and made it harder to bear. When it is all said and done, the solution to our suffering and misery lies with loving and faithful God.

Now others may argue, "Why didn't God just simply say to Adam and Eve, let's forget about your stuff up. Let's just move on, wipe the slate clean and start again!" However, if God had done that then he would not have been true to his own holiness and justice and there would never be an answer to sin and suffering. So thankfully, God in fulfilling His holiness and justice comes to us in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus, who became known as the Man of Sorrows and familiar with suffering.

He became the suffering servant to fix the problem and suffered more than anyone to fix our problem. And it is only Christians who can understand that fully. Non-Christians reason that even if Jesus had death hanging over him from the very start of his earthly life, big deal, isn't that's true for all of us? Other people say that they suffer more than Jesus did for Jesus only lived 33 years. Sure Jesus did have a few hard weeks at the end of his life, but they know people that suffer for years before they finally succumb to death.

So what's the big deal with Jesus' suffering? Well, the answer lies in who Jesus is and what He suffered.

First, He is the Son of God. He was in heaven enjoying perfect fellowship with his Father and didn't have to experience the suffering that is associated with man's disobedience. Yet in loving full obedience to his Father He willingly did so for that was the only way sinful man could be saved from eternal suffering of God's wrath for their sin!

Second, by coming to earth, Jesus suffered in body and soul the anger of a holy God against the sin of the whole human race. And we admit that even as Christians we will never understand the depth of that suffering. We will never understand fully, because along with unbelievers, we will never appreciate how holy and pure God is and therefore not understand his hatred against sin.

We tend to forget that in God there is no darkness at all. Absolutely no sin! We cannot even think without being sinful. We cannot even pray without sinning. In fact, we have to be really careful that we don't become entirely desensitized to sin and that nothing shocks us anymore.

Strangely, in today's society, most people even think it is God's business to overlook sin, rather than to punish sin. One of the reasons I think why we have no decisive winner in our current election is because there is no moral standards. Some people, Christians included, think that murderers and rapists and child abusers need to be punished, but that they themselves are exempt from God's punishment for they are good people! Some politicians think anyone can live the way they want to providing they don't infringe on someone's rights!

Don't worry about what God's word says, or that he is holy, that's immaterial, even though their continued disobedience will mean suffering, if not now then in eternity. And that is exactly the way Satan wants us to live and think, for then people will not repent of their sin!

The Bible teaches that suffering and punishment is the natural consequence of disobeying God, and that forgiveness is the miracle, and then only because of God's gracious intervention. The way a holy God deals with sin is the way He dealt with his perfect Son. He made Him suffer who knew no sin but had become sin for us!

He who created all the goats and bulls that were sacrificed through the ages has now become the atoning sacrifice. He took our place and He suffered by feeling the full wrath of a Holy God for our sin! And by doing so, he set us free from an eternal separation from God to eternal life with God. And the bottom line is that if we don't believe in God's answer for our sin, then we will suffer eternal separation from God no matter how good we may think we may be in this life.

In our Scripture reading (John 19:19ff) Pontius Pilate's name is mentioned. One of the reasons why his name is mentioned is that it marks a certain time in history. It dates the event. However, there is also a deeper meaning to why Pilate's name is mentioned. An earthly civil judge condemned an innocent Jesus, so that when we appear before the heavenly Judge, we may go free.

In Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate, though bearing full responsibility for his deeds, is serving the purpose of God with his injustice! Pontius Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent. He found no basis for the charge against him (Jn 19:6). Yet, the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go then you are no friend of Caesar" (Jn 19:12). Pilate became afraid and handed him over to be crucified. A great miscarriage of justice occurred that day. An innocent man was sent to the cross. However, Christians believe that a higher will ruled that day.

Scripture teaches us that God hates injustice and will not tolerate it. For instance, Psa 82:3-4; Amos 5:24 says, "Let justice roll on like and never ending stream..." [cf James 1:27] When Pilate handed this innocent man over to be crucified, the Judge of heaven and earth gave his verdict against man's sin. It was time for his beloved Son to become the Passover Lamb.

It's really beyond our understanding. The guilty, not only Barabbas, but him along with you and me are set free and the innocent is led away to be crucified. Jesus walks to the execution platform, is nailed to and hung on a tree while we go free. Crucifixion was a cruel way to die and was left for the lower class criminals, such as slaves and foreigners. A Roman citizen would not be crucified. However, the Jews would stone a person to death and would hang the dead body on a tree [Deut 21:22] because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. Paul mentions the same thing in Gal 3:13 "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." That meant that God turned his back on them.

In OT days, the curse for the people's sin was placed on the scapegoat (Lev 16) which carried the guilt of God's people to a solitary place in the desert. Anyone who touched the goat would have to go through a whole ritual to be allowed back into the camp. The goat was not allowed to return. It would have to go forever. Jesus hangs on a tree and becomes

and takes our curse. He is our scapegoat. He suffers that for us. And by doing so, we believing make the words of Psa 103 our words, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgression from us."

We need to remember too, that it wasn't only Pilate that sent him away to be crucified. It wasn't only the Jews that shouted "Away with him, crucify him, we also said it! We sing it regular – "Behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon His shoulders; ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers."

Yet, even more surprisingly, Jesus' Father in heaven said "Away with him." And the earth is plunged into darkness. Jesus removes the curse for Christians, and for all people who will call upon his name. That's why Christians think about Jesus when sickness or death or any other form of suffering is mentioned or comes our way!

Then we think about God's love and the Saviour's love for us! "Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heav'ns above, deep, deep as the deepest sea, is my Saviour's love, I, though so unworthy, still am a child of His care, for His word teaches me that His love reaches me everywhere."

When God poured out his wrath onto his Son for our disobedience, he did not remove suffering from this world. Suffering will last until Jesus returns. So how does this suffering and great love find expression today, in our lives and in a suffering world?

First, we recognise, that Christ suffered to pay for our sins and guilt and bring us safe to eternal life. When we are struck down with cancer or some other terminal illness, we don't panic but remember that we are safe in our Lord's hands, because our Saviour suffered for us.

Second, if Christ so suffered for us, then we should be willing to suffer for his name's sake. We don't deliberately suffer and in some way think it adds to Christ's work of suffering for our sin – to even think that for a moment would be sinful. No, we are willing to suffer so that the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink, the naked clothed, the sick and imprisoned visited, for in so much we do it for them we do it unto our Saviour!

The day our faith becomes all theory and doesn't arouse a response to our fellow man, is the day we may need to be aligned with the goats. We live in a world that is suffering. We along with the world continue to suffer the consequences of our own disobedience.

And so, because of what Jesus has done and suffered for us, we desire to show some of that same willingness to suffer, that same love for those who are suffering. We call this suffering with Christ. If we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, then we are included in Christ's death and in his resurrection. This is the cross bearing that He calls us to.

That is how we identify with his life, just as he identified with ours in his death. I know it is not that easy to love the unlovable, the prisoner, the enemy, the terrorist, but that is what Jesus did for us when He suffered the cruel cross. So rejoice that the Lord suffered for you. Pray that we as his redeemed people may be used to ease the suffering in this world. And while we do, may we also bring the good news to those who are suffering that if they believe in a suffering Saviour, then their suffering will not be for an eternity. Amen.