

## WELCOME 19<sup>th</sup> May 2019 – 5 Easter '19 C

Revelation 7:9-17

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! Special welcome to our visitors & guests...It is wonderful that you are all here! It's our privilege & joy to serve you in worship...

Sometimes...Life hurts...that's the unavoidable reality in our world. Turn on the news & you see it. Look in the mirror & your body bears the scars physically or your heart carries the wounds emotionally. Is God either uncaring to allow such suffering or is he unable to act in the face of it? Being a Christian doesn't guarantee a safe passage through this world unscathed. Being a Christian isn't like a flu shot that immunizes you from pain or loss. There's no bubble wrap for the faithful.

Luther once said that one of the marks of the Church is struggle. *Wherever there is faith, there is also struggle & suffering.* Luther knew Living in Suffering is not a sign of failure or even a lack of faith, but is a testament to a deep faith that takes God seriously; that believes God's promise that suffering will never have the last word. It's deep faith that lays hold of Christ's victory which alone provides strength in suffering, hope amid hurt & gives courage to keep on living in faith.

*He who sits on the throne will give them shelter. They will never again be hungry or thirsty; they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun. The Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water.*

*And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.* – Rev. 7:15b-17

Living in Suffering is a not matter of super-strength discipleship but of an eternally strong Saviour who already stands victorious over everything that would tear us down, fracture our joy, or destroy our trust in the Father.

We'll explore & experience that promised triumph even if today for you feels at a very real level to be another loss...We are glad you're here!

**Let's pray...**

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Holy and mysterious Saving God, let this day be a worthy celebration of Christ's resurrection. In the light streaming from the empty tomb, encourage us to put away our worries, and to discard our fears, that with minds open to your Spirit we may better love you and more adequately worship your holy name.

Through Christ Jesus, our living brother and Lord. Amen!

## 5 EASTER '19 C – MAKING ALL THINGS NEW: LIVING IN SUFFERING

### FAITH CHAT:

1. Do you have any scars? Where or how did you get them? Don't have to **SEE** them!
2. What enables you to keep your faith in painful "scarring" times? We know Christian faith is challenged by suffering...

"The inconvenient truth is that the overwhelming majority (80%) of persecuted religious believers are Christians". That is the Rt Rev Philip Mountstephen, the Bishop of Truro in an interim report to British Parliament on religious persecution in today's world. Report commissioned by Jeremy Hunt the Foreign Secretary. That really shouldn't surprise us & it was **CERTAINLY** the daily experience of those to whom John wrote in the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century...received Revelation.

As we've opened the pages of the Revelation John received from Jesus, we noted 2 key points for those early followers of Christ/& 21<sup>st</sup> cent Xns They were: 1 Outnumbered They were a minority expression of faith in a vast cornucopia of faiths. From the civil-religion of Caesar worship to the gods of the guilds & tribes, followers of Jesus were seen at best as a small separatist sect of Judaism or at worst as a subversive cult dangerous to Rome. 2 Outsiders – They rejected the supremacy of all earthly rulers & worldviews that placed humankind at the centre of the universe. They saw themselves answering to the only One God who revealed himself fully in love in his Son Jesus Christ & continued to work his will to completion through His Holy Spirit. They rejected the "me-centered" self-gratification survival of the fittest win-at-all-costs conquer/be conquered perspective of the Empire. They practiced a rare & unique generosity & hospitality & compassion as a community that knew no class or race distinctions. In their society stratified along every imaginable line: socially/politically/economically/racially those early disciples lived unheard of lives. And that put a target on their backs.

But life, we know, often doesn't discriminate... Tragedy, pain, suffering is not limited to the extraordinary or the overwhelmingly diabolical...nor is it always partisan... Bomb blasts in Sri Lanka, & an unhinged gunmen in New Zealand, leave the same tears the same result as a driver asleep at the wheel, a child unattended for just a moment, an illness caught too late or a condition you live with that wears you down little by little for years. And *THAT* raises questions for each of us who confess faith in a loving purposeful powerful God who promises good now & forever.

We cannot be satisfied with easy breezy justifications that dismiss our wrestlings, struggles & anguish to some divine "plan" **NOR** can we do what atheist Richard Dawkins does in his evaluation of a godless universe: "...some people are going to get hurt, others are going to get lucky...you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely...no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference." In the world of the atheist, there is no good no evil no justice no rhyme no reason no God...just "pitiless indifference."

We...who cry out to the Father in pain & persecution turmoil & terror fear & faith long for a real response real hope real relief...Which is where John leads us...*Rev 7 After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation & tribe & people & language, standing in front of the throne before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes & held palm branches in their hands. They were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne & from the Lamb!"...Then one of the twenty-four elders asked me, "Who are these who are clothed in white? Where did they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are the ones who died in the great tribulation. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb & made them white.*

Too often we fix that phrase "great tribulation" in the framework of all the confusing images & ecstasies of the return of Jesus...don't do that. It is better to see how those words apply to all of us. This world is sometimes called a "vale of tears:" yes...it...is. We often talk about "shuffling of this mortal coil" as a euphemism for death. More often than not this "mortal coil" doesn't shuffle it screams. We just shared our "scar" stories. Every one of that multitude has one...some more than 1. These were persecuted, these sick, this one was forgotten, this one abandoned, she was mistreated, he bereaved of children, these lived through divorce, another suffered physically for many years. Every saint comes out of a different kind of "great tribulation" but all come only by way of the cross & the blood of the Lamb.

Jesus' friend Peter would write to a church under intense persecution: *1 Pt 4:12 - Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.* We can never forget that in a world broken & twisted by sin & death: pain - tragedy - distress – tears are part & parcel of everyday living. In a world where humans rebelled & chose self-rule over submission/obedience to the Father who created us for himself, there is & will be more pain than we can imagine or possibly predict.

But be assured at no point are we left to suffer alone. *You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. - Ps. 56:8 Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands. – Is 49:15-16a*

The vast crowd too great to count is known by name. On this earth even the hairs of their heads were counted. Every cry heard. Every pain felt. By the Father who crafted each one in love for love. But there's another piece of what Peter says...*1 Pt 4:12 - Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering*, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. On the cross the sum total of all the world's pain anguish sin death evil & destruction were laid on Jesus Christ. What we experience in any circumstance he has already felt in whip & spit nail & spear thorn & splinter to the very depths of his existence. Betrayed by someone you loved? Bearing a burden not your fault? Rejected by those who should've welcomed you? Unjustly accused? Unfairly treated? Physically broken? Emotionally spent? Christ not only hangs there **FOR** you he hangs there **WITH** you.

On the cross of Jesus Christ, God himself absorbs the full weight of human sinfulness & the chaos sin leaves in its wake. It is there in the suffering & death & resurrection of Jesus that we glimpse the way we are ultimately healed & the end of all suffering & pain. We often ask, Is God either uncaring to allow such suffering or is he unable to act in the face of it? If God exists, why this tragedy? Why that disaster? Why so much bloodshed & heartache?

Here's the thing...That question assumes God's pre-eminent attribute is power. If God could, God would. Especially if he's good...Since he doesn't it must mean he can't. But when God fully revealed himself, what we saw most vividly was not power but passion-suffering love...We only know God through Jesus crucified/dead/buried/risen now reigning rich wounds yet visible We only know God's power revealed in the apparent weakness of Jesus' cross. *I decided while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. 1 Cor 2:2 For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, & through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven & on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. – Col 1:19-20* The god I can explain logically philosophically in terms of power & might & force is not the God who wept at Lazarus' tomb & carried his cross for my sin & death. I only know the Father through the Son dead/buried/risen/reigning in suffering love.

God loves us too much to allow sin/death/pain/suffering/tragedy to have the last word about us...that final ultimate word is Jesus Christ – dead/buried/risen/reigning who promises one day sin/death/pain/evil will be done away with as we are reborn fully in his image for all eternity. His victory alone provides strength in suffering & hope amid hurt & provides courage to keep on living in faith. I shared this the other week...try a different translation today...*Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our light momentary affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Cor 4:16-18.*

What could possibly "outweigh" the death of a child, the loss of a loved one, a life of pain, or slow deterioration of mental & physical capacity? Only the promise that one day all those things will be swallowed up in life & love & joy & glory greater than our hearts & minds can ever fathom...So we fix our gaze on the eternal time frame for which we were created & redeemed. And we live now with that destiny in mind. We live now with that point of reference.

Life here is but a speck on the radar screen of eternity & our witness to that eternal life in Christ in the midst of hardship, suffering & even death demonstrates to the unbelieving world around us the greatness & glory of the One who has called us as his very own precious beloved children. *According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, & to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, & unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Pt 1:3-5 Inheritance – imperishable, undefiled & unfading*

Whatever scars you bear/ordeal you are going through know this: Christ sees you. He knows the grief that weighs heavy on your heart. He knows the depression or addiction that harasses you. He knows the challenges you face & long-slog struggles you confront. Through it all, the Lamb bears the scars for you. He continues to bless you & is present with you to lead you to life & victory forever...a victory he has already won by the wounds he already carries.

*He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins.*

*He was beaten so we could be whole. By his wounds we are healed. – Is 53:5*

Our pain is forever joined to his so that his victory can be forever joined to our pain.

*He who sits on the throne will give them shelter. They will never again be hungry or thirsty; they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun. The Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water.*

*And God will wipe every tear from their eyes. – Rev. 7:15b-17*

Let's pray with that in mind... **Lord Jesus let my life in all circumstances glorify you. Be my strength and teach me to cast all my cares on you because of your great love for me. Amen**