

Sermon 20 August 2023

Romans 8:26-30 John 1:10-14

Our Gospel reading is a well-known statement about our faith, about what we believe. However, I want to focus on our first reading, and in particular the verse which reads, *'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.'* It continues the theme of faith which has been the focus over the past three weeks. And I want to begin by relating a true story.

In 1984, Jeremy Levin was the Cable News Network bureau chief in Beirut. On March 7 that year, which actually happened to be Ash Wednesday, he was kidnapped by Shiite Muslims. He was driven to a dingy, dark house where he was chained to a wall in such a way that he could only sit or lie down. He remained that way for the next four weeks.

Jeremy tried to keep his spirits up by positive thinking, but he soon discovered that no amount of positive thinking would take away his terrible loneliness. He longed to talk to someone – anyone! It was in this situation that Jeremy began to think about God. Now this was most unusual for him because he didn't believe in God. He was an avowed atheist.

But the thoughts of God wouldn't go away. They became more and more frequent. Then one day, this question crossed his mind: 'Could I talk to God?' Jeremy rejected the idea immediately. How could he talk to someone he didn't even believe in? That just doesn't make sense. He'd be kidding himself. He'd be losing his grip on reality.

But the thoughts of God continued. Soon Jeremy became preoccupied with them. Phrases like, 'God loves you,' and 'God bless you' kept bombarding his mind. Commenting on this later, he wrote, *'Even snatches of what little I had read in the Bible came back to me. I was like a thirsty man holding his mouth open to raindrops. I was consumed with pondering everything I had heard about God and the one called his Son, Jesus.'*

It was in this frame of mind that Jeremy awoke on Tuesday April 10. On that day, just twelve days before Easter, Jeremy did something he never dreamed he would ever do. He made an act of faith in God. He spoke his first words to God. They were very simple. He said, *'Oh Father, please take care of my wife and family. Please reunite us.'* Then Jeremy did something else he never dreamed he would ever do. He forgave his captors and asked God to forgive them too. Later he said, *'For the first time in my life, I felt whole.'*

In the months ahead, Jeremy was moved to several other locations. His guards became more friendly. Then came Christmas Eve. One of his guards asked him, *'What do you want for Christmas?'* Jeremy looked at him in amazement and blurted out, *'A Bible!'* Two days later, Jeremy received a small New Testament. He proceeded to devour it. He was especially moved by Jesus' words, *'All that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it shall be yours.'* Mark 11:24.

From that moment on, Jeremy prayed for a chance to escape. On the night of February 13 1985, eleven months after his capture, that chance came. A guard got careless and Jeremy bolted from the house and scampered barefoot down the mountainside to safety.

Jeremy became the CNN bureau chief in Washington DC. In his spare time, he travelled across the country, sharing with audiences his story and his newfound faith. He likened himself to Joseph in the Old Testament, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. When Joseph's brothers met him a few years later after he had

risen to power in Egypt, Joseph consoled them, saying, *'Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good.'* Genesis 50:20.

Jeremy was like Solomon who prayed to God for help, and God heard his prayer. I quote from 1 Kings 3:5, *'That night God appeared to Solomon in a dream, and God said, "What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you."*' Jeremy was like the people in our second reading of whom Paul says, *'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.'* Notice he says, *'all things.'* In other words, even those times when things are going against us.

So how does this relate to you and me? Well, as I have said before, bad times, challenges, even tragedies come to every single one of us. How do we respond? Do we get angry with life, with God? That's a very natural response. Do we succumb to what we believe is the inevitable? Or to put a little more bluntly – throw in the towel.

I need to say this – it is very easy for me to stand here in this beautiful church, surrounded by lovely people and being uplifted by wonderful singing and say that when you are really up against it, and I mean really up against it, you need to have faith and put yourselves in God's hands. Easier said than done. Retaining faith in the face of adversity and distress is far from easy. Putting ourselves in God's hands is a very positive action to take but it is quite natural to tend towards negativity when things turn to custard.

As people of faith, we are so lucky to be able to draw on a source of comfort and strength that is not available to just everyone. It is so very important that we make the most of that opportunity, that blessing. My friends, this is where the rubber meets the road in terms of faith. When life is merrily bubbling along, faith is relatively easy to embrace; our faith is not really tested. But when things go wrong and life turns on us, as it inevitably does at times, that is when we need to dig deeply and draw on what we have assimilated through church and church-related experiences and people, and through what we have come to believe. We take heart and encouragement from God's word, the Bible. Let me give you two examples which I have recently shared with you.

'Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.' Psalm 30:5. This attack won't last forever – morning is coming! So start believing that God will change things on your behalf.

And from last week's sermon: *'The Lord says, "When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown!'* Isaiah 43:2.

Finally, I repeat our opening verse, *'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.'* Romans 8:28. It is a message of hope, encouragement, and most significantly, of faith. And arguably one of the most important verses in the Bible.