

Sermon 16 August 2026

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

Our gospel reading is a well-known statement about our faith, about what we believe: *‘So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.’* John 1:14. To put it very simply, Jesus comes from God; Jesus personifies love; Jesus reflects the loving nature of God.

However, I want to focus on our first reading, and in particular the verse which reads, *‘We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.’* Romans 8:28. 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 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 just 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 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. How powerful is that! We have talked about the transformative power of forgiveness before, and that is just what happened to Jeremy. 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 his 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.

So how does this relate to you and me? Well, as I have said before, difficult times 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. Or do we even throw in the towel?

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 life throws up its challenges, as it inevitably does, 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.

I quote 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! For I am the Lord, your God, your Saviour."*' Isaiah 43:2-3.

So now, how is this relevant to our celebration today the anniversary of our move into our new church? I am sure you are only too well aware that there were many challenges along the way as we worked towards our goal of creating this wonderful complex. In the end, there is absolutely no doubt that we were sustained by the belief that this was God's work and that God would ensure that we would prevail. I refer back to the quote from our first reading: *'We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.'* Romans 8:28. How applicable is that?!

I want to finish by reiterating a point I made at our first service in here one year ago. I said that it was on the one hand the end of quite a journey but at the same time it was the beginning of a new journey. I believe that is still applicable and relevant today. We have certainly been on a journey over these past 12 months, and it has been an exciting journey and there are many people here today who have joined us in that journey. I believe that in many ways, our new journey has hardly got off the ground. I say that because I really do believe that there is just so much we still have to do in terms of growing our church, of growing God's kingdom here in Flat Bush. We need to harness our commitment, our enthusiasm, our faith if we are bring about that goal. I conclude with the story I shared with you exactly one year ago.

A martial arts student kneels before a master sensei in a ceremony to receive the hard-earned Black Belt. After years of training, the student has finally reached a pinnacle of achievement in the discipline. The sensei solemnly tells the young man, 'Before granting the black belt, you must pass one more test. 'I'm ready,' responds the student, expecting perhaps one more round of sparring.

'You must answer the essential question: What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' The student replies, 'Why, the end of my journey. A well-deserved reward for my hard work.' The master waits for more. Clearly, he is not satisfied. He finally speaks, 'You are not ready for the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student kneels before the master again, and again is asked the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' 'It is a symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art,' the young man replies. Again, the master waits for more. Still unsatisfied, he says once more, 'You are not ready to receive the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student again kneels before the master and hears the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' This time he answers, 'The Black Belt represents not the end, but the beginning of a never-ending journey of discipline, work and pursuit of an even higher standard.' 'Yes,' replies the master, 'you are now ready to receive the Black Belt and begin your work.'

My friends, it has been a year and yes, our new journey has begun, but it has only just begun and there is so much that lies ahead of us. I am so looking forward to it.