

When Life Hurts, my Spirit remains among you.

About AD52 Paul wrote a 2nd letter to the church at Thessalonica. They were hurt because of persecution for their belief in Jesus. A hurt difficult for us to appreciate while we live in relative comfortableness. Yet the church was growing in faithfulness at the very moment of its affliction. The letter offers a re-assurance and comfort to those oppressed, harassed, aggrieved, suffering people and is like cool water which strengthens them to carry on with the task: "May God complete your work of faith."

But this same re-assuring word to an unafflicted, comfortable church can seem more a threatening judgement. It becomes therefore a passage with which we must continue to struggle!

570 years before Paul, the prophet Haggai spelt out the consequences of disobedience. When people give priority to God and His house they are blessed. Obedience brings the strength and encouragement of the Spirit of God. He writes so that the people may be encouraged and not wallow in hurt feelings, depression or self-pity. They were to set themselves to the task of re-building the temple of God. He calls them not to fear but to be strong for God's Spirit is with them. The Spirit God had promised.

The people were hurt, demoralised by exile, feeling a lack of resources, destruction of their place of worship, loss of their identity as a people, bemoaning the glorious past. As individuals and as church we can identify with both situations

At some time, in some way, we have been hurt. We felt misunderstood, we lost a previous identity, place of worship, place of work, or place of abode. A feeling of not belonging any more, of being left behind. If we have felt a stranger in our own land, how much more so for the First Peoples of this country.

In our humble pride, we try to hide our hurt. We put on a front.

When we focus on the hurt, it appears as if no one on earth can shut out those innermost fears and deepest agonies. If only the waves of depression, the feelings of uselessness of all the work we have done, the sense of loneliness or feelings of failure would go.

Well-meaning friends and family use an old adage to tell us to hang in there. "Time heals all wounds," they say. Basically, we are being told to wait for time to anaesthetise the pain.

But, time heals nothing. Left to itself a broken bone will mend, but distorted. Hurts can be like sores which irritate. We may address the symptom, apply a bandage or a soothing cream but no healing is possible if the sore is left like an ulcer with its scab, ready to bleed at the slightest touching of that hurt. Time never heals toothache! Time magnifies pain. It pushes the hurt deeper into the mind to be rushed back to the surface by one tiny memory.

Can a person or church suffering deep inner hurts be healed? Can the pieces be put back together so the heart can beat strongly for the Lord, so that a new powerful way of life can be found? Time is no help. It is only a hindrance.

May I suggest 5 positive actions.

- 1 We can stop trying to figure out how and why we got hurt. Whether what happened is right or wrong is now irrelevant. What has happened has happened and can't be changed. A common popular saying is "it is what it is!" Water flowing under a bridge can never be made to come back and go through properly or differently. What matters is that there is a willingness to move on with God and trust in His mysterious workings in our life.

2. We can keep reminding ourselves that God knows exactly how much we can take and He will not permit us to reach breaking point. God never promised a painless way of life, but he did promise to be with us, always. He promised a way of bearing the pain and giving the strength to put us back on our feet when we stagger. We need to replace our faulty thought patterns that might have us believe that God is behind all our hurt and pain or that it is part of His punishment or discipline. God is not the author of confusion in our lives, nor are we.

3. When we are hurt the worst, it will help to go to a secret prayer closet and weep out all the bitterness we might have. Jesus wept. Peter wept bitterly after denying his Lord. Tears can work miracles. This can be hard – especially for those who have inherited a Scottish stoicism which is neither helpful nor healthy.

When hurt we are allowed to cry, and keep crying till the tears stop flowing. But, try to ensure that the tears originate from the hurt and not from unbelief or self-pity.

4. We can assure ourselves that we will survive and that, live or die, we belong to the Lord. Happiness is not living without pain or hurt. It is living in complete dependence upon God and, in so doing, learning how to live one day at a time. God is our strength, our refuge, our hiding place. It is learning how to rejoice in the Lord. How to "give thanks in everything for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

5. Finally, avoid the rationalisation which says that we are denying ourselves, or that this is the cross we must carry. Jesus denied himself, yet could not carry His cross! Neither can we! Nor can we deny the circumstances of our hurt. Jesus fell under the weight and load of His cross, weary and exhausted! So it was laid on the shoulders of another.

We will not learn the lesson of denial of self, submission and obedience to God until our cross pushes us into the dust. Then we will learn that we live not by our might, nor our power, nor our strength but by the power of God's Spirit. Then we cannot be afraid but be strong enough to move forward in God's strength helped by those He places around us. Then we will know that God is still at work, shaking the nations, offering Jesus who will fill this house: the temple of the church as well as the temple of our bodies, with His glory.

Rather than healing, time pushes healing away, distorting and warping our thinking and feeling and our relationships with God and each other. Putting a wedge between word and deed.

God, in Christ alone, can heal and can restore that which has been lost. God has to be allowed to step in and take over. He has to intercept our lives at our breaking points and stretch out His loving arms and bring our hurting spirit, mind or body under His care and protection.

We may carry past hurts which remain like festering sores. By holding on to them we can destroy both personal and communal peace. They hinder progress forward in Christ. We hold onto them even though they make us uncomfortable. We don't like them yet we treat them like friends. Often because we are fearful. We desire freedom but cannot imagine life free from the hurt we have carried for so long. It gives us something to talk about, it brings us attention.

We may open our clenched fist – which is the action of confession yet still we hold ourselves back.

In our silent response may we as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, open our hearts and minds to the healing power of Jesus as he meets us here in our worship. May we receive from him this morning the grace which will enable us to "forget what is behind and strain on to what is now ahead" - as individuals, as a congregation. May our faith in God be seen to be growing more and more and the love each one of us has for each other increase.

What is the assurance from God's word today for us? The Spirit of God is with us. To rebuild the temple of God's Church in Haggai referred to the reconstruction of a physical building. But I believe that Haggai's word for us this morning is that we continue to rebuild our lives on the foundation of the cross of Jesus: Be strong. Fear not. In this place I will grant peace. Amen.