**THE TRANSIT LOUNGE 2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:1-5**

Some years ago, on one of our many trips to the USA, we flew with Air New Zealand because it was a cheap flight, and found ourselves making a stopover at some place I can’t quite remember – it was probably Christchurch. What I do remember is the transit lounge. We were there for FOUR HOURS before we could get on the connecting flight that would take us to our destination! We couldn’t leave the lounge area, so had to wait it out. We decided after that trip, that cheap flights with circuitous routes and long stopovers were just not on!

In a transit lounge, you’ve left where you’ve come from, but you’re not yet at your destination. It’s a holding area. You get to sit and wait, maybe read, maybe chat, maybe eat - often sleep….and you get impatient to be on your way.

There’s a sense in which the transit lounge is a microcosm of what is going on in the wider word – at least the wider affluent world. There might be stressed executives in their crumpled suits and loosened ties; perhaps a shattered dad with his kids, newly separated from his wife; maybe a single woman who’s just lost her job; or an excited family off on their first overseas holiday. There might be seasoned travellers who take all in their stride, or anxious backpackers who know they haven’t much money left. Good and bad, happy and sad – all pass through the transit lounge….

In those neat and cushioned rows, you’ll find a spectrum of the human condition: there’ll be excitement and anticipation and delight, but there will also be brokenness and sorrow and despair. And in the transit lounge – people can’t go anywhere. They must sit with who they are and the baggage they carry.

Life for the Christian in asense is like a transit lounge. We’ve left where we’ve come from – where we were conceived in the mind of God. In Psalm 139 the Psalmist says, “you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

So we’ve left where we’ve come from. But we’re not yet at our destination. What is our destination? We’re heaven bound. In John 14, Jesus says, “In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

So in that sense, we are in a sort of transit lounge. We’ve come from God, and will go back to God, if we love and serve his son Jesus. But meanwhile we live on this earth for whatever span is ours.

And during our stay, to use another metaphor from Scripture, it often rains. In Matthew 5, Jesus said of God the Father, He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

It seems, that regardless of how good and upright our lives might be, we often get caught in the fallout of this sinful world, just as much as the next person. There are Christians who are among the casualties of natural disasters; there are Christians who suffer at the hand of evil; there are Christians who are angry and lost and lonely and in pain; there are Christians who get sick and die untimely deaths, and there are Christians who are poor. While God will often step in and do miraculous things in answer to prayer, we are not necessarily cocooned and protected from the evil in this world. It rains on us too.

The question of why bad things happen to good people is one that humanity has always wrestled with. We have periods of respite of course – even bliss – but eventually we must acknowledge that suffering frames our existence. We cannot escape it. It sits with us in the transit lounge of life.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians this morning, Paul has some words of real encouragement for us.

Paul was not a stranger to suffering. In fact when we read the list of things he experienced in chapter 11, we might wonder how he survived. Listen to this: He says,“ Five times I received from the Jews 39 lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

Paul suffered a great deal in his calling from God. He wasn’t protected or shielded. So when he speaks of how he deals with the question of suffering, we can be confident that he really has something to offer us in our own situations, whatever they might be.

What was Paul’s secret? How did he manage this question of suffering and pain?

He didn’t throw in his ministry or his faith. He didn’t give in to despair. He rose above it. How?

Paul saw past the physical and the temporal. Because of his relationship with Jesus, Paul was able to glimpse another reality – a glorious and eternal reality. In v16, Paul says, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary. What is unseen is eternal.”

If you know anything about American history, you’ll know that the slaves lived lives of great suffering. They were captives, forced to work on the cotton plantations. They were mistreated, exploited and deprived of basic human dignity. Yet they could sing! Do you remember what they sang?

“Swing Low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home.” Another one? “I’ve got a home in glory land that outshines the sun, I’ve got a home in glory land that outshines the sun…” “Soon I will be done with the trouble of the world, trouble of the world, trouble of the world. Soon I will be done with the trouble of the world, I’m goin’ home to live with God.”

The slaves were able to “set their minds on things above”, as Paul says in Colossions 2. They looked beyond their suffering; they engaged their faith, and looked forward to the promises of God; promises that Paul reminds us of in the first few verses of chapter 5. Let me read it to you in the Message translation:

We know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven - God-made, not handmade - and we'll never have to relocate our "tents" again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move - and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, (or a transit lounge! *cw*) and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies!

The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less.

So here is Paul’s secret of dealing with suffering. He wasn’t a masochist. He didn’t rejoice in suffering because of some warped idea that it made him holy. He didn’t enjoy the pain any more than we would – but he was able to look beyond it.

And as he looked past his own pain, Paul saw two things: one was that through his sufferings, others had come to have faith in Christ, and the other was an eternal reality where he’d glimpsed the glory of God.

As Paul took his eyes off himself and his pain, and looked to God, he was able to find strength to bear his suffering.

Often you’ll find that people who have suffered the most, have the most quiet and peaceful spirit. My mother comes to mind. She told me one night, that in the midst of her grief and misery following the accident that left her a quadriplegic, she felt God tangibly surround her with his love and fill her with his peace. She was able to hold on to that in her darkest times, and it helped her deal with her situation. My mum’s sister Marie said once that she was completely baffled by mum’s take on things – that her sister was one of the most serene people she had ever known.

In those times in our lives when difficult experiences and circumstances threaten to overwhelm us, Paul’s words are for us as well: “fix (your) eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary. What is unseen is eternal.”

So how do we do that in practice? All we need to do is to take ourselves into the quietness of God’s presence where we can pour out our hearts to him and know that not only does he understand he feels our pain. As his children his Spirit is already within us. Remember what Paul said in 5.5 “The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less.”

God is right here within us. We don’t often feel like praying when we’re struggling, but that is actually the very best thing we can do. It allows God to come to the forefront of our heart and mind, and allows him to bring us the strength and comfort we need.

We’re all stuck in this transit lounge we call life. Sometimes it’s a difficult place to be. Let’s remember that it’s not forever. We’re heaven bound, and while we’re on that path, the Spirit of God journeys with us, supporting us, encouraging us and loving us through the difficulties, until that time when we seem him face to face.

Let’s pray.