

**Romans 5: 1 – 11 = St. Paul's Formula**

**Sunday 27 March 2011**

**Nic Denny-Dimitriou  
Church of the Ascension, the Anglican Church in Hilton, KZN**

**Readings:**

Exodus 17: 3-17 [Water from the Rock]

Psalm 95 [relates to above theme]

**Romans 5: 1-11 [Paul's formula, suffering produces perseverance....]**

John 4: 5-26 [Jesus, Samaritan woman at the well]

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It's not often that I choose a Scripture focus for my sermon, ignoring the main thrust of the day's theme from the Scripture readings and summed up in the Collect, but today is one of them:

Our readings from the Old Testament, Psalm and Gospel all focus on God as the provider and sustainer of Life with a capital L, life that lasts. We hear it in the story of the provision of water for Moses and the people wandering in the desert, and the words of the Psalm draw attention to that, and we hear it again in Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well in which he tells her that he can provide the kind of water that quenches spiritual thirst, compared with the water that, even after drinking, physical thirst will again still be experienced.

But my attention was drawn to the passage of Paul writing to the Roman Christian church. As I was thinking these things through earlier in the week, my mind was drawn to a number of conversations I've had – some of them recent, but many of them from over the years, now in my memory non-specific yet focussed on how people dealt with tough issues of life.

In this week's email "Flash", I included an intentionally provocative comment – for those who don't receive the Flash and those who may not have read it, allow me to read it again this morning:

Every three years, when a particular passage from Paul's letter to the Romans (Chapter 5: 1-11) rolls around, I want to tape his mouth shut! He has a neat formula: "... suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us."

But in reality, some people do not gain endurance through suffering but are beaten down; endurance does not always produce character but bitterness and chronic grief; character does not always produce hope but a person who completely changes from an optimistic soul to a person who sees the glass empty; and hope does indeed disappoint people. So how do we "read" the venerable St Paul, and respond to his words, regarded as Scripture inspired by the Spirit of God? Join me on Sunday as I attempt to engage with these words...

Yes, provocative!

Elsewhere in Paul's letter to the Romans, the famous Chapter 8, Paul wrote:

28

31ff

35ff [What shall separate us from the love of God in Jesus? Nothing!]

Paul is confident. And he has every right to be, because he has experienced every hardship and difficult situation of life mentioned there, except the sword!

He presumably had in mind his own experience, and that of others known to him in the life of the early church.

His inner convictions about God, based on his transforming encounter with Jesus as Messiah mid-point in his life, are what carry his confidence.

Transformation – life and character

Turning around of a person's behaviour, based on life experience that brings profound change, based on altered perspectives that cause one to see everything differently

## Examples from recent SA history / “The Struggle”

As example of how people respond differently to life’s circumstances:

In response to harsh suffering...

One person may be bitter, mean, retaliating, and may have lost integrity (at least in public life as much as we can observe it)

Another person may be gracious and forgiving, reconciliatory, rooted in a personal integrity (again, at least as far as we can observe)

I would ordinarily leave a comment like that open to your interpretation, but today let me use some names, because I have heard and read comments along these lines, including one made years ago by a commentator, comparing two woman highlighted in SA’s political struggle: Winnie Mandela and the late Albertina Sisulu (*elaborate*).

The late Adelaide Tambo, member of my former parish in JHB (gracious example)

Desmond Tutu and the revered Madiba himself (also exceedingly gracious)

What brings that about?

Viktor Frankl – writing famously about The Holocaust...

Meaning!

People who survived, and more than just survived but retained an ‘intact’ personality able to express love, compassion, and live with integrity

Even a secular framework (outside of religious belief) notes the importance of meaning.

Purpose, and connected to something / someone greater than ourselves

Greater good

A point to suffering

For us, as followers of Christ, we have the ultimate resources for that:

Understanding of ourselves in relation to God, our Father and Creator

Friendship with God through Jesus

Understanding of what Jesus did for us through his life, example and teaching, and in his death and resurrection (which we celebrate every week in this act of worship together and for which we are preparing for our annual special celebration of that at Good Friday and Easter)

Transforming encounter with Jesus Christ  
More than just mouthing words

Story of my father from a few weeks ago which also elaborated on personal change and transformation brought about by encounter with Jesus

Engage with that challenge

More than “easy patter” for those in the midst of suffering, enduring great difficulty

Aah – that’s the problem

Trite formulas

Or more accurately put: honest and appropriate formulas (even from the lives of a great hero of the Christian faith like St Paul), but trotted out as an easy formula, or a platitude

Conversations: Not one, but many, therefore not naming or specifically referring to any one conversation or one person

Clichés

Another conversation:

Paul – give thanks to God in all circumstances

Not “FOR all” ~

But “IN all” ~

Significant difference

Still acknowledging God and knowing God in the midst of all circumstances

Yet not having all the answers, or easy answers

Not easy solutions to all issues esp. those involving pain (physical, mental, spiritual)

This has always informed how I deal with, for instance, funerals / difficult problems:

BE with people

Be there FOR people and WITH them

Offer hope and comfort

God's assurances

Offer other or new perspectives (but sensitively)

NOT trite sayings, or acting like a "smooth operator" in a salesroom who comes across to everyone else but himself as thoroughly false

Story of a family – not mention name

With them recently at a birthday celebration...

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Own response for a couple of years after the birth of Hannah and Joshua

One and half decades without children

New parents catastrophize about everything that could go wrong

What if... [God forbid] – then could not carry on as a priest, etc.

Different place now

Perspective / other people's experiences

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Dealing with these things, incl. suffering, disappointment in life, so as NOT to be beaten down or to become cynical or bitter or collapsed inwards with grief, or becoming "glass mostly empty" people

Not instant!

Not instant coffee – Ricoffy or Nescafe

Perhaps a slow filtered coffee, or percolated (elaborate theme – draws out flavour, over time, and aroma and full texture ...)

Time

Perspectives to alter

Be “filtered through” with the experiences of others, and of our own friendship with God, reading and talking with others and reflecting and listening AND building good relationship with God

God is in Covenant with us, in Jesus Christ, the source of Living Water  
Covenant made in context of trust, faithfulness

Assurance of St Paul that NOTHING will separate us from God’s love in Christ  
Jesus

Those are words, not only for the Roman Christians, but for us too  
They are not smooth, trite words, but tried and trusted words