

From Dust and Ashes
(Isaiah 61, vs 1-3; Romans 8, vs 28)

The cry, little more than a whimper, brought Cathy wide awake. She had been very tired, drained, almost to the point of exhaustion, and so what had started as a doze had drifted deeper. But so attuned was she to the voice of her four year old that she might even have responded from the grave. In an instant she was with him, in the next room, looking down into those pale weak eyes.

She had been told that he could no longer see her and would not recognise her if he could. His affliction was inborn, programmed from conception to eat away at his nervous system so that by now, they said, he would have little awareness of the outside world.

The child's eyes moved slightly to meet his mothers' gaze. The corners of the mouth betrayed just the beginnings of a smile, and she knew that he had seen. Whether it was real sight, or a picture within what was left of his mind's eye, or even a vision, a gift from God, she neither knew nor cared: to see that response made it worthwhile.

"Worthwhile!" How could any of this be worthwhile? The voice of reason darted assertively across her mind. It voiced an opinion that would be in sympathy with the views of many and, unwillingly, she found herself reflecting on the dark side of their journey together. Her increasing concern when the stumblings of a toddler had persisted too long. The bottomless pit opening up in their future when they had been told that there was no cure or hope. The seemingly countless times her heart would wrench as she saw or heard in other children what might have been in hers and now never would. The relentless physical punishment entailed in maintaining the care and sustaining the life of another. Even the times when she wondered if it were she who was responsible. What had she done wrong to carry this seed of destruction within her. Was she being punished? Surely, she had thought, none of this could have any worth or value.

For a moment her feelings echoed the voice of reason, but only for a moment. In her heart was the certainty that, against all logic, in this there was something worthwhile. Not that she would have taken this option if given the choice. But it was hers to carry, and from the dust and ashes something good, no beautiful even, had arisen. It hadn't just touched her, but others too. Anyone who had chosen not to walk away in fear, or to stay in anger, would be blessed.

Oh yes, she knew about fear and anger. In the despair of a night, long in nursing care, but not long enough to find much sleep, she would fear that she could not maintain all that must be done. Many also were the times when, in anger, she'd shouted and raged at God, but it didn't work. It wasn't that God couldn't cope. From the Garden through to the cross and on, He'd become an expert at handling rejection and fury. No, the issue is that it just doesn't help us. If we only ever see God through disappointment, bitterness or anger, then our view of Him is distorted. We can't get past blaming Him for something He's allowed, but hasn't wished, and blaming destroys relationships whilst only dulling the pain for a moment. Soon it returns to scream at us once more and any promised peace and restoration that might have flowed is lost in the clamour.

She would never say that she'd suddenly seen it as clearly as this. But there is help that God sends down, which reaches deep into the depths of despair. This aid isn't a safety net into which we can bounce when life gets too difficult, only to climb back out into the mess that brought us there in the first place. It's a real lifeline and if

we cling to it, as one day she had done, making that first prodigal step back towards the Father, then He will come to meet us and haul us to a higher ground.

The local church had promised some support for her predicament, someone willing to iron, clean and shop, giving her more space to care for her son and herself. She had jumped at the chance, but had been less than enamoured when the offer had turned out to be a refugee, a young woman from Africa. However, her initial concerns were unfounded. Not only did the woman work hard, but the lifeline she brought became a powerful cord back to peace and, yes, even hope. In Africa she had lost everything; home, family, possessions, nearly life itself, and yet what little anger and bitterness remained in her heart was not directed at God. Now this was not because she believed no longer, a philosophy that Cathy had drifted into on the back of a 'how can a loving God permit this?' sort of reasoning. No, her faith remained strong. She had said that this was because she had met God in the better times and wasn't about to doubt in the dark what she'd seen in the light.

Cathy had realised she'd never seen in the light. In the days before her son had been afflicted, God had hardly featured in her life. She, unlike her African refugee helper, had no experience of knowing, being with or relating to her Creator. Only in the dark had she approached Him and then not to seek help, but to rail and curse.

"You know, God even responds to that," the African had said. It was then that Cathy had realised that He had. He'd answered through the torrents of anger she had poured out. But all the lifelines that had been offered, until this one, she had seen as handouts from an adversary, as crutches, and she'd burnt every one.

This one, though, she hadn't rejected and gradually through it came a restoration. As the months passed she began to learn from this child of Africa, this daughter of God. She started to recognise that there was courage and self-sacrifice maturing through what she was doing. She began to see that God was able to use the hardest things to soften, the darkest to bring light. The difficulties in life, even those at the bitter and painful extremes, could be used to encourage people on, to motivate them, to raise themselves and raise others with them, to join with God in bringing restoration to His fallen creation. Perhaps these things could not arise without an element of suffering.

For Cathy this was turn-around stuff; not seeing the worst in a situation and letting it disable you, but sifting and straining for the blessings. The more the circumstances were abysmal, the more they could be mined: the darker the seam, the richer it was and the greater the yield. From the wreckage of a life a phoenix was emerging. Though her son could barely lift an arm, through her God-restored perspective he was able to fly. Most importantly, for sustaining her new found hope and vision, she saw that this tragedy had not been established so that it could be a saving grace, but rather, because it was there, it could be used. It could become something beautiful from God. And yet there were many who could not see this victory. They would still question if it had all been worthwhile. Surely it would have been better not to have to come here at all. Should we not curse the creator who has brought us to this place?

But who, without the mind of God, can compute the potential for benefit, who can audit the final outcome? Who can fathom the infinite permutations and spin offs that might come to fruit down the ages and into eternity: good works that would last and be built on in the New Heaven and Earth to come, all because of one life? Must we always assume that the way things appear before our eyes, at that point in time, will be the final reckoning? Here was a life that to the eyes of the world had seemed worse than worthless, but through the hand of God great things were being wrought.

And not just for Cathy: there had been growth and maturity in others as they had responded to the challenge. As they provided care and support and worked the seam together, so they became richer in the things of God: love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, goodness. Many grew so rich in these fruits of the Spirit that what they had become available abroad: a blessing carried beyond that place into the lives of those outside.

Cathy knew that this bountiful harvest could not have been reaped without the challenge of affliction on which it had been propagated. She would wonder if great things might not be fashioned from all suffering and reasoned that they ought. She recalled the woman on the news as, in God's strength, she forgave those who had murdered her son. It was an act that could encourage thousands to be released from their own captivity to bitterness and anger. At the end of the day, at the restoration of creation, the gain could outweigh the loss.

But it would depend on us. God will respond, but only if we allow Him too. Cathy knew only too well that if we persisted in our grief and anger, if we continued to hold bitterness and unforgiveness close to our hearts, then pain, desperation, hopelessness and fear would remain; there would be no relief, let alone victory. She had also learnt that if we excluded God from our lives, then because He honours our choices, He is unable to draw close, even when we need Him. She even wondered whether the rising number and severity of natural disasters were not a direct effect of humanity increasingly and knowingly rejecting the sustaining presence of Jesus and thereby disturbing the stability of creation. It had, after all, been made through Him.

She looked down once more at the twisted form before her and saw only the smile, there again, for an instant again. "Who would have thought that 'little old you' could be such a Godsend. You've touched lives more deeply lying here this last year, than in a lifetime of running around." A sharp thought surfaced in her mind. Would this child; did this child see it as she saw it? Would he have not asked, as Jesus had, for the cup to be taken away, or would he also, like the Lord, have finally agreed it was God's will and not his? Cathy did not know. She fancied that, even with all the restoration, they would still wish for the cup to pass by: better still, to have never been offered.

But what should God let pass, what ought He to stop, the suffering of her son? Yes, that was obvious, but logically that would mean all diseases like his and then the suffering of all children. But when did childhood stop and who would wish to arrive at that age? So then, an end to all suffering: but how? No more sport or recreation, no more travel, for we are in danger in the midst of our pleasures. May be the answer is to make us indestructible, but then we would live forever, unrestrained, tyrants and villains as well as the good. Would such licence not make devils of us all?

And what of the potential for humankind to damage each other through relationships? Does this mean no more feelings or contact with each other: an eternity spent in not so splendid an isolation instead of that promised in healed and restored friendships for those who chose to return to the Fatherhood of God? Perhaps we could be manipulated into perfection, but where in that would be our free choice?

No, even with her son lying before her, she could not imagine a world without suffering that would be worth living in. Especially now she'd discovered a way of making even the pain yield some rewards.