

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Faith, hope and love

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

I remember learning once in my Chinese-cooking phase that there are three ingredients which define Chinese food: garlic, ginger and spring onions. Without them it can't be what it's meant to be and a fresh supply of them is a must.

In the painful realities of living in a broken world there are three things we need if we're to keep going and come through as we're meant to. We find them again and again in the Bible, in the letters written to people who'd chosen to believe the great news they'd heard about Jesus of Nazareth - that he was God in human form, that he'd lived as God meant us to, endured death as we have to, and overcome its power. Three things then defined those people: firstly, the *faith* in Jesus that brought them into God's new community; secondly, the *hope* of real life with him beyond this life; and thirdly, the *love* they were created to enjoy. Three ingredients to keep us spiritually alive: faith, hope and love.

I

Faith is the first ingredient essential to the health of our inner life. Imagine if you can a family of mice who'd lived all their lives in a grand piano. They loved the music and often wondered about the one they instinctively knew must be there, causing their world to be filled with beautiful harmonies. Then one day a mouse returned very thoughtful from another part of the piano. He'd found out, he said, how the music was made. Wires were the secret, wires that trembled. Maybe there was no unseen player. Later another mouse had a different idea. It was the little hammers that jumped up and down on the wires that were the real cause. Anyway it was clear they lived in a mechanical world and they dismissed the idea of an unseen player as a myth. But the pianist continued to play.

Before Jesus, belief in God could have been seen as a bit of a leap in the dark. But now we have first-hand accounts of Jesus' life, it's a considerably bigger leap to deny the existence of the God he claimed to reveal, or to believe Jesus was mad or a monstrous liar when he claimed to be God's Son and the Saviour of the world.

The Bible simply assumes God exists and 75% of Australians say they agree with that. But the Bible also reminds us that even demons have that kind of faith. To believe Jesus was telling the truth moves us beyond mere belief that God exists, to acknowledge him as Lord of every part of our lives. The Bible speaks of believing *into* Jesus, in the sense of entrusting ourselves to him. In Martin Luther's words,

Such faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. Everything they have is held in common. Now the human soul is full of sin and bound to die, but Christ is

full of grace and life. When they are joined by faith, the believer's sin and death is taken by Christ and Christ's grace and life belong to the believer.

How do we get that kind of faith? We abandon our pitiful attempts to impress God with our goodness and cast ourselves on his mercy. We take Jesus at his word and accept the new start he offers us through Jesus' dying and rising to life. We rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for daily strength, as we commit to living God's way.

We often talk vaguely about having faith, but the faith that sustains us through thick and thin is faith in God, as he's chosen to reveal himself. The British racing-driver, Sir Donald Campbell, lost his life racing on a lake in Scotland when his boat exploded and sank. His good luck charm, a toy stuffed animal, somehow survived intact, but it had no power to help *him* in the final crisis of his life. It's the power of the one you have faith in that counts.

We're often tempted to put our faith in other things - family, the security we've built for ourselves, our own abilities. But all those things are mere passing shadows compared to the living God, our Rock and our eternal Refuge.

II

The medical journal *The Lancet* published a study of a hundred and six patients with less than three months to live. Those who scored highly on questions about their faith in a power beyond themselves were found to be far less likely to have feelings of hopelessness. In fact faith and hope are so interwoven it's impossible to separate them. Hope has been described as faith hanging on. The Bible describes it as the anchor of the soul. It can keep us afloat in the storms of life, and steady us in times of mental and emotional turmoil. So how can we have it?

For hope to be real it needs a more lasting basis than mere wishful thinking has. So what will outlast everything else? Jesus said, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

The psalmist sang: *In God's word I put my hope.*

The apostle Paul wrote: *Faith and love spring from the hope, stored up for you in heaven, that you've heard about through the word of truth, the announcement of good news that's come to you.*

Paul also prayed a memorable prayer about hope: *May the God who imparts hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

How does God impart hope? Through loving the world so much that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Jesus' disciple Peter, who saw for himself the empty tomb, wrote about God's great mercy in giving us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

But our hope is not just the hope of life after death. Christ's assurance of forgiveness brightens today with the hope that whatever our defeats in the past, we have the present and the future to live for God.

The Baptist pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent fourteen years imprisoned and tortured by the Communist regime in Romania. He said the persecuted church had survived on hope. He himself hoped that when released he'd find a way to help the families of those who'd been killed as well as those still in prison. When eventually set free he was able to leave Romania. Later he wrote,

“My family and I came to the West as poor, unknown immigrants, our only treasure our vision and our hope. A hope in many ways unfounded because we had no means to fulfil it. But despair is useless. Hope is a force to be reckoned with.”

Through his writings and the help and prayers of many, he set up the international organization *The Voice of the Martyrs*. It’s still speaking up today for persecuted Christians round the world.

A helpful picture of hope comes from the poet George Herbert. He said that to live in hope is to dance without the music. Music might make dancing easier and more enjoyable, but it is possible to keep on dancing without it - just as we can keep on going, as long as we have hope.

III

“Three things remain,” the Bible says, “faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

An expert in God’s law once asked Jesus which commandment is the greatest. Jesus replied,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. That’s the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbour as yourself. Everything else God’s said hangs on that.”

Love for God comes first, because it’s through connecting with him that we access the power we need to love people - not just those we like, but our neighbour who might be quite unlovable or even wish to harm us. To really love, to keep on wanting the best for those who want the worst for us, is something we’re far too frail to do by ourselves. But as we connect with the One who *is* love, he will supply what’s missing in our very *imperfect* love for our neighbour.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, but didn’t stop at mere words. “While we were still sinners,” the Bible says, “Christ died for us.....While we were God’s enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”

The power of God’s love is still saving and changing lives. Some years ago a pastor by the name of Ron Williams passed away after serving his community faithfully. His childhood was unhappy and his misery compounded when the grandfather who’d brought him up was killed by hostile neighbours. Church seemed to offer something different, so he went along and was amazed at being welcomed, despite his ragged appearance and unwashed smell. The missionaries invited him to eat with them, something white folk didn’t normally do for his people. Ron felt wanted. He was curious to know why they were different, and when one of them told him how God had changed his life, Ron was ready to ask God to change him. And God did. Ron found he was able to love his stepfather. He stopped drinking. He went to Bible College and then to work among the people who’d killed his grandfather and been enemies of his own tribe for generations. That’s the power of God’s love.

The Emperor Napoleon said, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I founded empires; but upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Only Jesus Christ founded his empire on love.”

It’s abundantly clear we can’t live without love, a truth acknowledged by the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell when he wrote:

The root of the matter, if we want a stable world, is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple I'm almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean is love, Christian love, or compassion. If you have this, you have a reason to live.

Why is love greater than faith and hope? Faith and hope help to see us through this life, but won't be needed in the eternal life where love reigns supreme.

Conclusion

Faith, hope and love – the three things that give life purpose and meaning, even in the midst of pain.

Years ago in Tanzania we got to know Eleanor, then in her fifties. A few months after her marriage her husband had gone off to Uganda and never returned. His family blamed her. For him to up and leave like that she must have been a very bad wife. But by African custom the marriage had made her part of his family, so she continued on, fulfilling her duties as daughter-in-law, though ill-treated and despised because she was childless. But her faith in Jesus as the One whose death had bought her eternal life sustained her, and her fellow-Christians encouraged her to keep on loving the family who treated her so badly. It was by no means easy, but over many years the relationship with her in-laws improved, as her generous spirit won their grudging respect. To us she was a great example of a life well lived.

Whatever turns life takes, three things remain for each one of us – faith, hope and love.