

A couple of weeks ago Trudy and I met in Alexandra with some pastors from around Otago-Southland and two from Canterbury. It was helpful in ways I hadn't anticipated. On the last morning we were given 2-3 hours to spend alone to see what we might learn. Some sat, some walked, some wrote, some prayed; some may have slept.

The previous evening 6 of us went for a walk along part of the Millennium track that begins at Clyde. We walked for 40 minutes or so – I was stoked – it was the first time I'd walked that far and for that long for many months. So when it came to the following day I chose to walk and listen along part of the Rail Trail near Galloway. To prepare for this I took pain-killers and anti-inflammatories and used my recently acquired walking poles. That I was able to walk 5 kilometres was something of a miracle. While I was walking, keen to sense what the Lord might have for me to consider, some words kept coming to me. The first two were 'toil' and 'pain,' the others I'll come back to another day.

For me walking was toil; it was hard work. As I thought about that I remembered Peter's words to Jesus in Luke. Older translations read, '**Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.**' Toil conveys to me a picture of sweat, difficulty and exhaustion. Anyway it spoke to me about the truth that there is a hard work dimension to following Jesus. '**We have toiled all night.**' I think of Phil and Glen's commitment to Divorce Care over 16-17 years; I think of the team led by Julie Blair that sets up for Play Group every Wednesday and then has to take down half of it on Wednesday nights because we're into multi-use; sometimes when the bird meet they have to take the whole lot down and put it all up again the next day - toil. Often there's no obvious reward or fruit. It's hard work. And by the way they're only two illustrations I could use. Many in our community are involved in toil for Jesus' sake and thank God for you. Toula has been involved in the Christian Education Programme for much longer than the time we've been here and Glenis Whipp has been involved in Girls' Brigade since, well since Girls' Brigade began – or shortly afterwards

As I journey through the next stages of my life, I trust that I'll still be toiling – got a lot of models here to follow. Above all I hope life with Jesus will be fruitful, not necessarily successful, but fruitful. Toil will be part of that.

Pain became my obsession over the latter part of this walk. Despite the medication, I was in pain. I managed to get back to the car. After struggling to get into it, the first thing I did was to look up a concordance (on my phone as you do) and discovered that the words pain/pains/painful first appear in the Bible in Genesis 3 and are last mentioned in Revelation 21.

I found this:

Genesis:

**Genesis 3:16: To the woman he said, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.'**

(As my first aside, males have taken the 'he will rule over you' part of the biblical story very seriously haven't they? But it's a consequence of the fall; Not God's original intention.)

**Genesis 3:17: To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'you must not eat from it. Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.**

Now there we have pain and toil together.

And in Revelation:

**Revelation 21:4: 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'**

From Genesis 3:16 to Revelation 21:4 pain and its associated words are mentioned over 60 times.

Let's talk about pain. It's used in many contexts – from the utterly ridiculous 'house of pain' that used to be along the road, to describing someone as a real pain, to experiencing incredible pain and all variations in between.

**Definition of pain:**

- 1. Highly unpleasant physical sensation caused by illness or injury.**
- 2. Mental suffering or distress.**

There we have two major sources of pain but they're not exclusive, for instance emotional pain may be seen as part of mental suffering and distress, but I see it as separate.

I think I've learnt a fair bit about physical pain over recent years as many here have, although because I've never had a baby or a kidney stone I know nothing. I know that at times, tears have been the only response to knee pain. Not looking for pity here – purely illustrative, you have your pain stories too and if we had a couple of weeks we could tell them some of them.

When it comes to mental suffering or distress, emotional pain if you like, I'll never forget standing at the window on February 12, 1997, the day Rebekah left Dunedin for Australia (plenty of you can identify with this kind of pain). It didn't help that it was raining and as I stood looking out the window I felt nothing could have prepared me for this and no medication or soothing words could take the pain away. Are you with me on this? I know Barak Obama is – I read this week that when he and Michelle dropped Malia off for her first year of College he said it felt like his heart was begin ripped out. And I'm also aware that some here have gone much deeper into emotional suffering than my puny illustration.

Pain as we observe comes in many shapes and forms – physical and emotional I've mentioned – physical pain so intense that all you can do is cry/scream/shout or rage. And there's the pain of loss, the pain of grief, the pain of disappointment, the pain of relationships turned sour, the pain of hopes dashed and the pain of deep and long-lasting inner torment; all this and more...

What have I left out? Can you think of others? Have you experienced others? Reading through what I've said I wonder if emotional/mental pain is more common than physical pain – what do you think?

When it comes to the Bible I found pain/painful mentioned in this way:

<b>The pain associated with labour and childbirth</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Physical pain</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Emotional pain</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Toil</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Sin</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Being free from pain</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Honest words</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Discipline</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Unjust suffering</b>	<b>1</b>

This list is not exhaustive but a beginning.

Where labour and childbirth are mentioned it's often to illustrate a point about pain - it's a very painful even for the joy that's set before the mother so to speak. Wasn't that a wonderful story of the baby Nixon born on the street in Dunedin this week – she was interviewed on that superior programme the Project. I'm sure I've told you before of the pregnant woman who was having a particularly long and difficult labour. She asked the nurse, 'how long does the hard part last?' The nurse who'd been round the traps a bit replied, 'oh, about 18 years.' Lots here can identify with that pain. And for many it goes on much longer than 18 years.

So what do we learn from all this about pain and the Christian?

I Pain has a positive contribution to make to our lives – at a physical level it does draw attention to the fact that something isn't quite right in our bodies. A headache, back pain, a sore stomach or blocked sinuses to name a few. Pain in that sense is a remarkable gift that enables us to deal with the problem – truly we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Mental/emotional pain isn't so easy to quantify or describe other than it reminds us something isn't quite right. And pain can sometimes be overwhelming, let's be under no illusion about that.

II The other aspect of pain is that it's a consequence of the 'fall' – the pain of struggling to survive in a fallen world. We're reminded that from Genesis 3 onwards pain in its many shapes and forms is part of the price of being human.

III However pain has no place in the life to come. As we've already noted, **'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'**

In 1940 CS Lewis wrote, 'The Problem of Pain.' In it he tried to grapple with issues around suffering at an intellectual level.

In 1956 at the age of 58, Lewis married Joy Gresham – initially as an arrangement of convenience but then he fell in love with her. They were re-married in a Christian wedding at her hospital bed. She'd been diagnosed with cancer – and died not so long after. Lewis was absolutely crushed and there were no answers for his deep pain in the book he'd written.

After Joy died CS Lewis wrote 'A Grief Observed.' According to his biographer Alistair McGrath, 'The Problem of Pain is an over intellectualized book, helpful but lacking in existential engagement.' In A Grief Observed Lewis talks about his experience of pain at this deeply personal level and offers a great description of the grieving process. He criticized simplistic approaches to pain including some of those he used himself back in 1940. 'A Grief Observed' was initially published anonymously to save embarrassment and some of his friends thought, 'This is a book that will help Lewis deal with his grief' and offered him a copy. McGrath comments, 'The later Lewis is a much more helpful Lewis.'

And maybe that's where we end today; if through our pain, in whatever shape or form it comes to us, it drives us back on God; if we become more gracious, more thoughtful, more conscious of others and not so ego-centric then maybe pain accomplishes something quite grand – but that's a story for another day.

'Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear' the old hymn says, 'all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.'

Let's gather our thoughts and bring them to the Lord God.