

NECMA, 31st October 2004

Several weeks ago I realised I was next in line to lead the fortnightly devotional at the retirement village, and I reminded one of the people that it was her turn the following time.

That was on a Thursday afternoon. By Saturday, Margaret suddenly was taken by the Lord.

The week after that, the funeral was held, what - when I was a lad in the UK - would have been called a “High Church” affair. It started with a procession led by a churchwarden carrying a huge ornate cross, followed by the minister, nowadays called a priest - and at the rear by another churchwarden, with an enormous bible, and a couple of juniors too, all robed in white. The only thing missing was an incense censer, and the whole ceremony reminded me of a Requiem Mass, although it wasn't a Catholic church.

Normally a funeral is a God-sent opportunity to preach salvation to the unsaved attending, but instead they chose to partake of communion.

Leading the village fellowship the following week, I said that brooding on Margaret's loss from among us was not productive, and rather that we should positively rejoice because where she is, her pain and suffering and need for a walking stick is no more. A number of “Amen”'s were heard!

We sang two songs, both composed around a text hinted at in Margaret's funeral's order of service, though not developed. Lamentations 3 in the NKJV says...

19 Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall.

20 My soul still remembers and sinks within me.

21 This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.

22 Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.

23 They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.

24 “The LORD is my portion”, says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!”

25 The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.

26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

I sought the advice of my stepson (who is a minister) on how he felt I might go about the devotional. He asked me if I had heard of the book,

subsequently made into a movie, called “Tuesdays with Morrie”.

Morrie was Morrie Schwartz, a university lecturer, and tutor.

Mitch Albom is a sports writer and commentator living in Chicago.

Mitch graduated from uni and made promises easily. Keeping them was another story. His sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, asked him graduation day in 1979 “You'll stay in touch?” Mitch answered his favorite professor, his mentor, his friend, without hesitation, “Of course”.

Fast-forward sixteen years to Mitch's life as a successful newspaper sports columnist and broadcast journalist. Adept at juggling phone calls, faxes, interviews, problems, often it seems while driving too fast to another appointment on an overloaded docket, Mitch has a wonderful wife but no time to spend with her, a beautiful house on a hill, a stock portfolio, and a brother he hasn't talked to in years. He lives on a deadline--too fast is the only speed he knows.

Then, one night, tired from yet another day into which he crammed too much work, he sits in front of the TV, channel-surfing, and catches the crest of “Nightline”. Shock! There's his old teacher and friend Morrie Schwartz telling that he has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and that he's learning how to die. Mitch hadn't seen Morrie since graduation day.

This story of Mitch Albom and Morrie Schwartz illuminates many universal truths, including this law of nature. And perhaps that law has an emotional equivalent as well. Morrie's illness and death gives Mitch a perspective that directly changes his life. The very success that caused him to neglect the most important things becomes the means to send Morrie's message to all who need reminders of what those things are.

The punch line could be stated as “Unless we learn how to die, we'll never learn how to live”.

Mitch calls Morrie... and a new thing starts. Every Tuesday he jets to New York, spending the whole day with Morrie. They talk and think, and have a ball together.

As the disease progresses, Morrie loses his privacy in the most basic ways. He can't dress himself. He can't feed himself. He can't go to the bathroom by himself. He learns to accept help from others. He shows us a few things about dignity and acceptance as he turns his physical weakness into strengths of the heart, the mind, and the spirit.

Mitch eventually loses his friend Morrie. But as a result, he reconnects with brother Peter, whom he hadn't talked to for years, being “too busy”.

Yet while Morrie Schwartz dies, he lives on in the hearts of his family and friends and, now, in the people who read this book.

Remember that quote... “unless we learn how to die, we'll never learn how to live”. How are we to die, meaningfully? In two ways, both similarly.

1. Die to Jesus – using head knowledge, which is needed to a degree. We need to hear the message about Jesus Christ, crucified, for you and me.

2. Then we need to die to Jesus – using heart knowledge, and grasp His saving grace offered from His grave, although he is not there but at God's right hand. But the offer comes from the grave, because the only way it could work was for Him to die, Himself. Die, in practical terms, by living the life of the cross, laying ourselves down, our pride, our arrogance, our determination – like Sinatra – to “do it my way”.

Let us visualise a scene described by apostle John, translation is the NIV...

John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him”.

3 In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”.

4 “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”.

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel's teacher”, said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

There have been many sermons preached about that text, by far better preachers than I... and I use it here purely to steer your train of thought... leading to a scripture frequently seen painted in gold in churches of

yesteryear... expound... from the NKJV... Aman last week

John 3:14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 “that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

17 “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

18 “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

19 “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

20 “For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

21 “But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God”.

You know, the punchline is NOT John 3.16. It is 3:17.

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather that the world through Him might be saved”.

Every morning I receive by email the next in a series of study notes from an 85-year old retired minister in Seattle.

Here are his notes from the day of the fellowship meeting – which fits today's topic perfectly, far better than what I had started to prepare. You might think that this was planned.

THE PEOPLE OF THE LORD

12 : THE PROCESS. Rom. 8:30

The call, the invitation for salvation has gone out to every generation and every nation. No one who responds will in any manner be excluded. Jesus experienced death for EVERY MAN. Therefore all are included in the plan of salvation. Not that all will be saved, but all COULD HAVE BEEN SAVED. The provision has been made for ALL. Heb. 2:9 NIV

Heb 9-12 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

10 In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

12 He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises".

The same theme is presented in the fact that "one died for all". 2 Cor. 5:15

Jesus graciously paid the ransom for ALL, that all might be set free from the captivity of sin. 1 Tim. 2:6

Jesus has offered His blood, on the heavenly mercy seat and made propitiation for the sins of the WHOLE world. Not only that, He is the mercy seat. 1 John 2:2

God's call has gone out to the entire race of mankind. ALL may come, ALL may receive but MANY have turned a deaf ear to the gospel, therefore will suffer the consequences.

Let me ask something. How many of us have been offered a free gift?

I have several here. You may recognise the paper bags as coming from the golden arches restaurant and if you would like to have this gift please put up your hand.

I'll choose two or three, but even if I don't pick you, please listen carefully.

1. Geoff forcefully refuses the gift
2. Lynne will only accept an alternative from the one offered.
3. Ron accepts the gift graciously.

Consider each of their responses carefully and see if you can find a link between the portrayed attitudes, and what we have been discussing.

Brother McKnight wrote in his notes that...

The call, the invitation, for salvation has gone out to every generation and every nation.

No one who responds will, in any manner, be excluded.

Jesus experienced death for EVERY MAN.

Therefore all are included in the plan of salvation.

Not that all will be saved, but all COULD HAVE BEEN SAVED.

The provision has been made for ALL.

I believe that each of us needs to examine our hearts to see if we have rejected the message of salvation, or accepted it on our own terms, or if we embraced it whole-heartedly having a genuine desire to live the life, to walk the walk. Jesus told his disciples “Pick up YOUR cross, and follow Me”.

Often we find that not only a dramatic presentation, but a musical item will clinch a thought, and linger in the memory better than just words from the pulpit.

In 1887, an English composer by the name of Sir John Stainer wrote an Easter oratorio called “The Crucifixion”, in which there is a wonderful piece, introduced by a soloist, and which leads into a four part chorale, this is pure scripture in song. I have arranged it to suit my voice and thoughts on timing, and offer here pieces 8 and 9, comprising John 3:14–17... and may I remind you that the punchline is in verse 17, not verse 16... and the words are from the AV...

John 3:14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

17 “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather that the world through Him might be saved”.

Brother McKnight's notes conclude... In the concept of the “whosoever” spoken by Jesus we see the same invitation. For instance, they will not abide in darkness or remain in sin, because the light of the gospel will illuminate them. John 12:46

The promise of escaping punishment and destruction because of sin is of great importance to every believer. It is a manifestation of the vast love that the Lord has for humanity. John 3:15-16

Those who had experienced the mercy and pardon of the Lord bore witness that those [whosoever] believed on the Lord Jesus would receive

the remission of sins. That included forgiveness of sins past and an introduction to a force and power which delivers us from sin. Acts 10:43

Whosoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of the Spirit. 1 John 5:1

The calling of the Lord is that the person called would fulfill the Divine purposes of the Lord. The Lord has an eternal motive in calling His people to Himself. Rom. 8:28

The calling of the Lord is that we might fellowship and have intimate companionship with the Lord Jesus. He is searching for a people who want to know Him in a most confidential way. 1 Cor. 1:9

The calling is an invitation to each of us to participate in His grace and pardon. Gal. 1:6

A response to the call of the Spirit assures one of a place in the kingdom of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thess 2:12

The called enter into a liberty of the Spirit that is one of the most tremendous blessings of the Lord. Freedom from the old life. Freedom from the habits which once controlled our lives. Gal. 5:13

A definite purpose of the call of the Lord is that His called out ones might live before Him in holiness and righteousness. 1 Thes, 4:7

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Yes, we should ask ourselves if we have genuinely said “yes, please”, and “thankyou” to Jesus for His gift to us of salvation.