

Life is hard; Kia Kaha

1 Corinthians 4:9 – 13, Matthew 16:18 – 23

If I was to ask you about your life events; what would be the things you remember? What would be some of the highlights and some of the lowlights? For all of us there is bound to be a mixture of events that have shaped us. Many of those events have been outside our control. Some occurred because of our own choices – good or bad.

Some events are in the past; some continue on and show no signs of letting up. For all of us; life is sometimes hard. I'd go so far as to say, if it's not hard for you right now – then make the most of it because difficulties are sure to come your way again!

A tiny minority of people appear to go through life relatively unscathed. I suspect that is the way it appears though rather than the way it really is.

This week we begin a new series entitled Kia Kaha. 'Kia kaha' is a Maori phrase meaning 'stay strong'. We are people of Aotearoa NZ; it's good to speak te Reo whenever we can.

So our series begins with my intro today acknowledging that life is bloody hard for most of us in some area or other. That's where we'll begin this series; then we'll move to some very practical ways the Lord has for us to cope with the difficulties of life. Hopefully we'll see that in the midst of hardship we can stand strong and actually thrive, gaining resources for the journey recognising it is the Lord and the community of faith who enable us to 'kia kaha'.

It's not something we can do alone. If you scratch the surface of any one of us; you'll expose our hurts and struggles. The Lord always brings amazing growth from our struggles but that doesn't mean we don't bear the scars.

How scarred is your soul?

Mine is criss-crossed with scars – some are tiny and others more obvious. Perhaps I look like I have it all together but most of you know that is far from the truth. I am choosing today to tell you something of my story – not to gain your pity or admiration – just to remind you that we all have our own stuff to deal with regardless of how we appear.

An early memory is my parents fighting in our kitchen by the coal range. They were yelling at each other about something. My mother hit my father and then Dad hit Mum back with a punch to her stomach that doubled her over.

Their marriage didn't last. Mum and us kids moved from our country life into a city when I was about 10. We saw Dad once a fortnight. This destroyed my brother David. I recall him sobbing every time Dad brought us home again. Later we only saw Dad annually.

We lived in a state house with little money and much stress for Mum. She didn't want to hit us children so when life got too much for her, as it did frequently, she would swear at us. You f..n little 'c...s' was a common expression.

High school was horrendous. Looking for love in all the wrong places I left as early as I could. I left home as early as possible too – keen to get away.

Then a whole bunch of good stuff happened; beginning with Jesus claiming me and loving me in a way that I had never experienced before. To that point no-one had loved me unconditionally. Jesus did. My scarred soul did not have to be fixed before he loved me. He loved me as I was.

I'd like to be able to say that everything was great after that but it wouldn't be true. I did meet Kevin at Youth Group. We fell in love. That was good.

Just before we married my brother was tragically killed on his 17th birthday. His body was not found for a week later.

Kevin and I had two children; each of whom had health episodes, our son with a physical disability which caused him a lot of early pain requiring hospital procedures twice a week.

Then we moved to an isolated community where Kevin decided he didn't want anything more to do with church. It felt like my world fell apart – 2 generations before me had divorced and I was afraid that was my fate too. It was a mission for me to remain part of a church but I am stubborn.

We moved again. Our youngest daughter was born and developed a life-threatening physical condition. We couldn't let her cry because of the risk of haemorrhage but she outgrew that after a couple of years.

Later again Kevin lived with constant pain because of an orthopaedic condition and had to give up work a few years later. The solution was a double amputation – a good outcome but a horrible process.

My mother died at 68 – too young. My father died later after developing dementia, followed a couple of months later by my stepmother who had cancer. That was just before I became Vicar about 6 years ago.

Many of you could come up with much worse things than I have faced. And of course there have been many good events and good times. I am so grateful to God for my parents – we had some wonderful years before they died. I know they did their best with what they had earlier. The Lord brought some reconciliation and understanding between me and them.

I am thankful that God has preserved Kevin and my marriage and that Kevin supports me the way he does. I'm very grateful for our children and grandchildren. And most of the time I am grateful to be your leader. I have had a good life; thanks be to God!

I still struggle now though. Leading a church in today's disinterested culture is hard. I struggle with relationships. Often someone is annoyed with me about something. Usually that is my fault but because care so much for and about people, I still find that really difficult. I take too much responsibility on myself forgetting at times the Jesus is Lord of the church and the responsibility is his. (Actually the responsibility for church health is all of ours.)

Life is a mixed bag for all of us. Catherine Hepburn apparently said that 'Life is hard; after all it kills you'.

Scripture shows us from the beginning of humanity that it has always been this way.

Jesus suffered more than most. Peter and the other disciples did not want to hear anything about the fact that he was going to win by losing; he was going to die. They didn't want to know about coming hardship. The answer was to deny it.

And boy, did Peter cop it from Jesus for denying that. Not just because he was viewing the situation with rose tinted glasses but because in doing that, he was denying the very purposes of God!

Peter wanted to protect Jesus. We all want to protect those we love don't we?

I was absolutely gutted when our youngest daughter made some of the same mistakes I did. I tried really hard but I couldn't protect her. And if I had, she probably wouldn't have become the assertive, deeply caring friend she is to so many.

We shouldn't be surprised when difficult things happen. Bishop Justin¹ told us at Convergence earlier in the year, that young people especially need to hear that life is hard. 'Life is not a party'. Unrealistic expectations make difficulties worse.

Justin reminded us that our faith is not 'Coca Cola Christianity' either. It cannot be all sugar and fizz. If our faith is to sustain us, we need a robust understanding of the God who reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. We need a theology that not only makes room for suffering and pain but sees the value in those things.

The Apostle Paul understood suffering. He experienced it first hand – you could even say he embraced it; not for its own sake. He wasn't a masochist. But he embraced it because his suffering allowed the Good News of Jesus to be spread abroad.

Maybe ours will too?

This week I've been privileged to be with some wise people: Yvonne Smyth said she wished she hadn't fallen and smashed her ankle. But it has happened. "Onwards and upwards" was her realistic phrase.

¹ Anglican Bishop of Wellington Diocese

Catherine Barak says life is bittersweet. We need to focus on the positive and make an effort to do so.

Another person said it's important we don't circumvent God's purposes for us by trying to get out of our present difficulties. There are always lessons to be learned; lessons that will help us in the future if we are prepared to stay in the present to learn those lessons.

Paul recognised this and wrote:

... we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:3 – 5

James echoed Paul's sentiments:

Consider it pure joy, brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

After Jesus had reprimanded Peter, he told him and the other disciples, that anyone who wants to follow him must pick up their cross daily. We must be prepared to lose our lives. I suspect that means that we can't only live for fun and party and fizz.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?
Matthew 6:25 – 26

I hear many people say they don't know how people cope with life without the Lord. I agree. And I don't care if people say Christianity is a crutch. Jesus is the one who walks by my side, enabling me to get through the hard stuff. If Jesus is a crutch; so be it.

But following Jesus certainly doesn't take away our suffering. It can even add to it in some ways. It means we have to stand up for him and what is right at times. It means we can't take the easy way out but must honestly face up to circumstances and our own failings.

However we Jesus followers do experience Jesus' companionship in the midst of our trials. And we can comfort others in theirs.

Paul again:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

Kia kaha' was apparently commonly used by members of the 28th Maori Battalion during World War 2. They were as an extra battalion that was moved between the 2nd New Zealand Division's three infantry brigades. They fought during the Greek, North African and Italian campaigns and earned a formidable reputation as a fighting force. They were the most decorated New Zealand battalion during the war.

Before being disbanded in January 1946, the battalion contributed a contingent of personnel to serve in Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force.

I doubt those Maori soldiers ever felt there was anything special about them. I imagine they felt like second class citizens at times. Perhaps we feel the same.

Yet the Lord promises to give strength to the weary and power to the weak.
Isaiah 40:29

So over the next several weeks we are going to consider practical and Biblical ways for staying strong.

We'd love to hear your stories too. Just what helps you to walk through hard times?

Kia kaha in the Lord everyone.

Reflection questions

As you reflect back on your life, what difficulties have helped you grow?

What results did God bring from those things?

What area/circumstance in your life do you struggle with now?

How does God and others help you in this?