

A Living Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening. It's great to be here for a service of confirmation and reception tonight. And thank you, Joanne, for that reading. That was excellent. It's always great to have a good reading from Scripture.

It's good to be here tonight, especially because this church was featured in the Sunday Age today. Did you know that? You probably have no time to read it, Paul. But this was listed as one of Carly Minow's personal favorite places in Melbourne, a place of significance.

In fact, it was rated as number three. So Campbell High School was number one. I can't remember what number two was. Her parents' home in Monometh Avenue in Canterbury. And Holy Trinity Doncaster, because she, of course, got married here as Carly back when she was...

Not Carly, what was she? Whatever she was called in the Neighbours. I can't remember now. It's such a long time ago. So I feel very auspicious being here on this very special occasion, being able to preach when you've been celebrated all across Victoria in this way.

Well, at least by some, anyway. Now, I don't know what it's like in your family, but when I was a child, the punishment routine, if you misbehaved, and as you can imagine, I only misbehaved on very rare occasions.

[1 : 0 7] But if I did misbehave was that my father would start twitching with his belt. And if you really got up his nose, which I had the habit of doing on the rare occasions when I got into trouble, because I was one of those children that always muttered something.

The last word had to be always my word. And I would be, as I've sent to my room, be saying something under my breath, which would mean you would be dragged back for further sort of injunctions and further threats of punishment.

And things were really grim if my father actually stopped fiddling with his belt and actually took it off, because then you would have to take off running around the house in the hope that he wouldn't get you, because he might inflict punishment on it. Now, I know we live in a politically correct era, and none of you have actually experienced this form of brutal corporal punishment.

But some of us here are very old, and we remember these things from our childhood. The other aspect of the punishment routine was that my father would threaten to send us to a home for delinquent children. And I didn't know what a delinquent child was then, but going to a home for naughty children didn't seem like a very good idea at all.

And that's what used to be threatened when I was a kid. And when we went on holidays in the country, we would always drive past the prison if there was a country town which had a prison, and lots of country towns did. And when you drove past the prison, it looked like a very forbidding place, because it had amazingly high walls, barbed wire on the top, and really, really huge iron gates at the entrance.

[2 : 29] And my father would say, now that's where the naughty children go. And you'd go, ooh, you know, we really have to behave ourselves in this household. Now, again, I know that none of you have probably had such terrible things happen to you in your childhood, but there's some things that I recall from my childhood about being punished.

Well, I guess all of us growing up would see our parents as being a great blessing in our lives. We probably all have things about our parents that we regret or things that we wish could have been different. But on the other hand, you wouldn't ever, I don't imagine, choose to grow up in life without parents, would you?

Well, there might be some who want to debate that point tonight. Perhaps we've had a past what you're feeling in a certain way about your parents. But I don't imagine you would choose to grow up without parents, would you? But one of the sad realities of the world in which we live is that there's never been more children in our world who are growing up without parents because of the AIDS pandemic in Africa in particular, but as well as that in the Pacific and in parts of Asia.

There's actually millions and millions of children these days who are growing up parentless, and those children are orphans. And that's a pretty sad thing to think about, isn't it? Children who are, in a sense, literally bringing themselves up because there aren't parents to care for them around.

And I don't imagine you'd choose that. In Romans chapter 8, which we've just had read to us, or a part of it anyway, Paul is talking about the great blessings that we have as God's children because God chooses to adopt us into his household and into his family.

[3 : 54] He rejoices in one of the most profound experiences of the Christian person, which is the fact that God takes us as sinful, rebellious people, people who have turned our backs on him, and people who have, in a sense, rejected him in our lives, and says, I still love you, and I still reach out to you, and in fact, I want to offer you the freedom and the privilege of coming into my household and my family and being adopted as one of my children.

And I want to suggest tonight that that's one of the greatest blessings that flows from being a Christian person. There's many, many blessings that flow from being a Christian person, and we're celebrating that tonight with reception and confirmation.

But I think this is one of the highest ones that's offered to us. It's as if those of us who are fatherless and hopeless and under God's judgment are extended and brought into a radically new situation.

Paul says that those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. And of course, we receive the Spirit of adoption. And so Jesus is saying here that the very word and the very term that he used in his own intimate personal relationship with his Father, the term Abba, Father, is given to us.

And so those of us who were fatherless and cut off from God and, in a sense, not a part of the family, are brought into the household and the family, and God enables us to actually enter into the same intimate relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son, via the Holy Spirit, that Jesus himself had enjoyed throughout eternity as one of the members of God's household.

[5 : 23] You will see some pictures up there from time to time on the screen. And Jesus goes on, and Paul goes on to say that the Spirit dwelling in us testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God.

So tonight we want to celebrate the fact that in Jesus Christ, God adopts us into his family and his household. He makes us one of his children. Now, you'll often hear people say that all people are the children of God.

But in the New Testament, those who are God's children are those who have been adopted through Christ's work of redemption on the cross into his household and made members of his family, where God becomes our Father and Jesus becomes our brother.

And we enter into that very particular relationship where God adopts us into his household. And I want to suggest tonight that this isn't something that we deserve, nor is it something that we earn, nor is it something that in a sense God just has to do because we're so impressive.

He does it purely because of his grace and his love. And he welcomes us and receives us and adopts us because he actually has mercy on us and wants to include us in his household.

[6 : 30] And this truth should overwhelm us. And I wonder whether it affects you in any way at all or whether it's just something you're so used to, you take it as being pretty average. To go from being cut off from God and disconnected from God into being actually received and welcomed into his very own family is an incredible privilege that God offers to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Well, I want us to think a bit tonight about why God actually did this. Why did he adopt us? Well, in verse 17, he says that if he adopts us into his household, we actually become heirs of God.

The inheritance that was Jesus Christ, in a sense, if you're the true son or the only son in Jesus' case, becomes our inheritance. And we actually become co-heirs with Christ, we're told here, provided we share in his sufferings and we share in his glory.

Now, in ancient Rome, adults were often adopted into the family. And in ancient Rome, adults, sorry, slaves, I mean, were often adopted into the family.

In the household of the ancient world in which Jesus or the New Testament was written, that context in the first century where Paul's just been exploring in Turkey and other places, a household was made up of a very large number of people.

[7 : 44] It wasn't mum, dad and a couple of kids living in a place like we think of a household today. It was actually a much bigger dynamic entity with sometimes 60 or 70 people living under the same roof and sharing in a household of community together.

And in that household, there were often slaves. And if you're a slave, you had no rights and no entitlements. But sometimes in those New Testament households, the slaves were actually adopted and included in the household as full members of that household and given all the rights and all the entitlements and all the privileges that come as if they'd been born into that particular family.

And what I think St. Paul's talking about here is that God in Jesus Christ adopts us into his household. And when he adopts us into his household, it's almost as if we were slaves who have now been given all of the privileges that go with being a member of that particular family in that household.

And along with having all of the privileges, we get the inheritance as well. Now, a quick little quiz. Who's the richest person in Australia? This should be a very obvious question to people living in Doncaster.

I answer rather. Who's the wealthiest person living in Australia? Any suggestions? Gee. No one here knows? James Packer.

[9 : 02] Okay, now did James Packer have to do anything to become the wealthiest person in Australia? He just had to be born into the Packer household, didn't he? And by being born into the Packer household and a certain thing happening in his family with his father dying, he actually inherited all of the wealth that goes with the Packer empire.

And what's more, he not only inherited the wealth that goes with being a member of the Packer family, he actually got the business as well because he inherited the family business. Well, as God's children, what we're being told here is that in Jesus Christ, God adopts us into his household.

And not only do we have the privilege of relationship with God the Father and with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, but as well as that, we get the inheritance that goes with being a member of that household.

That's pretty amazing to think about too, isn't it? That we actually get the same inheritance that Jesus had, which is life with God that starts now and goes on into eternity. But as well as that, we actually get to be a part of God's business in this world today.

So just as James Packer, in a sense, didn't have to do anything to become the wealthiest person in Australia and didn't have to do anything to run one of the biggest companies in Australia, in a sense, God calls us into his household and we get all of the blessings that flow from that.

[10 : 15] But we also get called into his business in this world. So it's a double privilege. We get to inherit eternal life with Jesus Christ that goes on forever.

But as well as that, we get to actually live for Christ today and be involved in his work in this world. It's a bit like the sort of local pizza joint that's near us and every community has a pizza joint or two.

And most pizza joints that you go to, other than the big chains, you'll see mum and dad and a couple of kids running the pizza joint, won't you? And that's a bit like the one that's near us.

I'm not sure if we've got a picture of the pizza joint there somewhere. That might be the next slide. There it is. And you get the impression of the one near us anyway that the kids don't have much choice about working in the pizza shop.

It just goes with being a part of their family. They have to actually be there serving up pizzas. Well, in a sense, I think that's what I'm trying to suggest tonight. I think God's calling us into. We don't only get the riches of being adopted into God's family and all of the privilege that lie in the head when we get to be with Christ forever in eternity, but in the meantime, we get to share in his sufferings and to be a part of his business in this world because that's part of our inheritance in Jesus Christ.

[11 : 29] And I think we get some insight into what that means in the next section. Now, if you're following this in your Bibles, you'll see that there's a chapter, there's a sort of a heading rather in the next section. And you would think reading one of our Bibles that there's a whole new sort of train of thought happening here and that somehow the connection with what I'm just talking about isn't all that significant.

And I want to suggest that actually I don't think that's very helpful because, see, Paul moves from the glory of our adoption in Jesus Christ to the groaning world. And I think that's a really powerful aspect of what this business of our inheritance is all about.

Well, what do I mean by that? Well, you don't have to be all that sharp to work out that we live in a world that's groaning, don't you? Don't we? We live in a world where we're actually constantly reminded of the fact that things are out of whack, whether it's global warming, whether it's in the threatened environmental catastrophe that we keep hearing about fairly frequently, whether it's floods or droughts or volcanoes or cyclones or the drought that we're in the midst of here in Australia.

There's a sense in which the fact that things aren't quite the way they're meant to be. Isn't that the case? And we're incredibly conscious of that, aren't we, in the world in which we live because of the pervasive influence of the media.

These days we're incredibly aware of anything that's happening in the world at any time, instantly, because we'll know about it through the media. So the sense that things aren't quite right I think is very pervasive for us living in this particular time in history at this place where we are.

[12 : 57] But we also know that the world of people isn't exactly what it's meant to be. And we know that the relationships that people enjoy and are part of are out of whack as well because there's so many sad and tragic things that happen in people's lives.

And we also know, if we're really honest, that those of us who are a part of the church that as much as there's great things that happen in the life of the church, there's also things that happen in the life of the church that we're not proud of or things that actually aren't what they're meant to be.

And that's true of every church as well as some churches more particularly. So the good news, I think, that Paul, the thing that Paul's saying here is that we actually live out our faith in a groaning world, in a world that in a sense is out of whack, in a world where things aren't quite what they're meant to be, in a world where things are actually degenerating and actually moving away from the way God first intended them to be.

And I want to suggest tonight that part of what God's calling us to in Jesus Christ and being adopted as his children is to live out our faith in that groaning world and to play our part to make a difference in that world.

Now, the great news about this groaning world that we live in, as Paul puts it here, is that it's not going to actually be like this forever. There will come a point when God is actually going to return and he's going to fix up this planet and he's going to fix up the affairs of humanity as well when Jesus Christ returns.

[14 : 20] But in the meantime, we live in a world where the planet groans, where people groan, and in a sense we in the church groan because we know it's not exactly how it was meant to be. And in fact, it could be so much better than it actually is at present.

Well, what do we do in the meantime? Well, what I want to suggest tonight is that God's calling all of us who have been adopted into God's household to be a part of his business in this world.

And what is that business that God's calling us into in this groaning world? Well, I think he's calling us and those who have been confirmed and received tonight in particular to actually be involved in serving him in this world and to play our part to make a difference in this world.

And that can be expressed in a whole range of ways and in a whole range of different aspects of our lives. For some people, it might be using their God-given gifts to make a difference to the environmental catastrophe that we keep hearing about because some of you might be wired by God and prepared by God to make a difference to this planet.

Some of you might actually be gifted by God and blessed by God so that you can make a difference in the affairs of human beings because Christian people have always been involved in actually making a real difference in the lives of others, whether it's through the helping professions or whether it's through being involved in medicine or in some sort of profession where people's lives are enriched or helped who might be struggling or suffering in some way.

[15 : 48] We also need to, in a sense, play our part by using our God-given gifts to help those who are most affected by a world that's out of whack, a world where people suffer and where some people are left behind as a consequence of that.

And I hope some of you will have a conviction to play your part to making a difference in the lives of those who suffer or who are marginalized in our world. But as well as that, as God's people, we play our part really significantly by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we play our part by actually seeking to offer the hope that we've come to experience so that this world in which we live, which does groan, can actually have a much better vision and perspective on what life could be if people were willing to respond to Jesus Christ and to give their lives and to come into the adoption that we've experienced.

And tonight I want to particularly challenge those of you who are here to think about whether God might be calling you into some form of full-time Christian service. Because in a church such as this, hopefully God will be laying it on the hearts of some on a regular basis to consider whether they might be playing their part in this broken and groaning world by being called into full-time Christian ministry and leadership and to using your God-given gifts to make a difference in this world by proclaiming the gospel and being set apart to teach God's word and to build up and to nurture congregations of God's people or to plant congregations of new groups of God's people.

Because I think that's part of what God's calling some of you perhaps to be a part of in serving this broken and groaning world. The thing is we don't do any of this in our own strength.

[17 : 24] And the great thing about this particular passage is that Paul finishes by talking about the fact that God through the Holy Spirit having adopted us into his household actually is there with us as we identify with and as we seek to serve this broken world.

Paul says, In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness, we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

And he who searches the hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. So as God adopts us into his household and gives us that incredible privilege of being able to be brothers and sisters with the Lord Jesus Christ with God as our Father and gives us that amazing privilege of being able to serve him to make a difference in this world.

We don't do that in his strength. We do it, we do it in the strength of the fact that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us and that Holy Spirit dwelling in us is empowering and enabling us to live for God.

And when we feel like it's actually too hard to know how to pray or too hard to know what to do, the Holy Spirit we're told here is groaning in words or sighs that are too hard to even understand or in groans to actually take our halting prayers and to bring them before God and to use them as part of his work in this world.

[18 : 47] That's a pretty big privilege too, isn't it? To know that the Holy Spirit's dwelling in you and not only in a sense helping you to be a part of God's family but as well as that helping you to pray aright as you seek to serve God in this world.

Well tonight those who are being confirmed in particular have the incredible privilege of knowing that they've been adopted into God's household. They're God's children and they have all of the privileges that flow from that.

But as well as that we're going to lay hands on them and we're going to pray for them because we're going to commission them to serve Jesus Christ in this world. In a groaning world. In a world that's got incredible needs and in a world that needs to hear about the knowledge of Jesus Christ that those who have been confirmed are going to celebrate because that's the great hope for the world.

Amen. Amen.