

A little plumbing job



- reflections on a quadruple heart bypass

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Looking back over the past couple of years it is easy to see in retrospect the tell-tale signs that something was not quite right. Not being able to keep up with Andrew, lifting a heavy ladder being more and more difficult, and being happy with 4-hour working days. Perhaps, and perhaps the most obvious was being unable to climb up Cape Town's Table Mountain with a couple of younger guys from our church, although - but that was easy to blame on the heat and being older than the two mountain goats who were leading the way!

A somewhat routine visit to the doctor in June for what I thought were bronchial problems led to investigation of that and also just as a precaution a visit to a cardiac nurse. I felt almost a fraud visiting her, as my symptoms were so mild, chest pains were more of a discomfort than pain, and shortness of breath not overly significant. Anyway, her diagnosis was classic symptoms of angina, to be confirmed with an angiogram, and with likely outcome medication, possibly an angioplasty and stent job, with major surgery very, very low on the list of possibilities.

The angiogram was fascinating, and far preferable to a visit to the dentist, apart from the prick of a local anaesthetic, no pain. It was amazing to see one's heart beating and the flow of blood through the various arteries. To my layman's eye it all looked pretty normal to me, but to the specialist it was very different. Lying still waiting for the incision to clot over is not the best way to receive the outcomes from the specialist: - 'two arteries blocked to 80% and one to 50%. Our recommendation is for a triple heart bypass'. Shock is hardly the word to describe the news, as it was so unexpected. All through the morning I had felt somewhat of a fraud and with such mild symptoms they'd kick me out with a few pills, but a heart bypass! The consultant went on to say that half of all heart problems were due to lifestyle, and the blame for the other half landed on parents. Despite the cream teas down here, I was forced to blame my parents! One bit of very good news amongst the diagnosis was that I had not suffered a heart attack, meaning that the heart muscles were not damaged and that the problems could be fixed.

Despite the shock, a strange and wonderful sense of peace hovered over me and that I was very much in Father's arms. That was reinforced by a peculiar happening when a lady who had recently joined the chaplaincy team happened to wander through the day unit where I was. Normally they will stick to proper inmates, but for whatever reason she had ended up by my bedside. It was such a blessing and encouragement to be able to talk with her and for her to pray for me before she left. It was as if Father was saying, 'It's OK, I'm here and in charge, there's no need to worry'.

That sense of peace, that God was firmly in charge and that there was no need to worry or be anxious was something that grew and grew for both Jill

and myself as we waited for the operation. I rationalised this and tried to understand why. Three possible reasons came to mind:

- My previous experience of surgery was limited to a simple day case, which was not so bad and I was recovered in a few days with no pain, so this wouldn't be too bad, and anyway, nowadays a heart bypass is just a routine operation
- That the procedure was just so horrendous - sternum sawn through, rib cage pulled apart, etc., that my mind was blocking it out
- That it was the 'peace of God, which passes all understanding', which Paul talks about when he wrote to the Philippians

Talking to friends they convinced me that whilst the first two were just possible, that it was indeed that peace that comes from God and God alone.

As the weeks progressed and we saw the surgeon who would perform the operation, which had now grown to a quadruple bypass, the reality of what was going to happen began to sink in, reinforced by a familiarisation visit to intensive care and a fair amount of research on the web, looking at videos and animations of the operation - not a pretty sight! Whilst I was a good candidate for surgery, there were risks, and although small, a chance that I would not survive the procedure, or that I would suffer a stroke, or that there would be complications, mainly in the form of infection. Preparations for these eventualities were important, with at long last a will being drawn up and handover notes to deal with all the complexities of modern life. Standing in the garage one day the thought struck, this could be the last time. Perhaps the hardest was a trip to see my mother; would this be the last time she saw me? We took the opportunity of having all the family together just before the operation to get a family photo. 'Would it be the last time?' was the thought in everybody's mind.

Yet through all of this that sense of peace continued, and if anything, grew. It is no lie to say that I never worried about what was going to happen, or what might happen. Indeed, the closest thing to a worry was that I was not worried when I should be. God's peace was ruling in our hearts.

How was this possible, that facing such a huge event in our lives, with the possibility of terrible outcomes, that we had such peace and that we were just not worried?

Over recent times I could not get beyond the first line of the 23rd Psalm: *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.* It was all we needed, knowing God as that shepherd, we had no want.

So much of our confidence stemmed back some years when we came across this picture. This spoke to us then of our place of absolute safety and security in Father's hands.

No matter what happens, no matter the ferocity of the storm, nothing, absolutely nothing can dislodge us from that place of safety. The only thing could take us away was our own wilful stepping out of Father's hands; very much like the story of Peter walking on the water; he sank as he took his eyes off Jesus and allowed the ferocity of the waves to dominate his thinking.

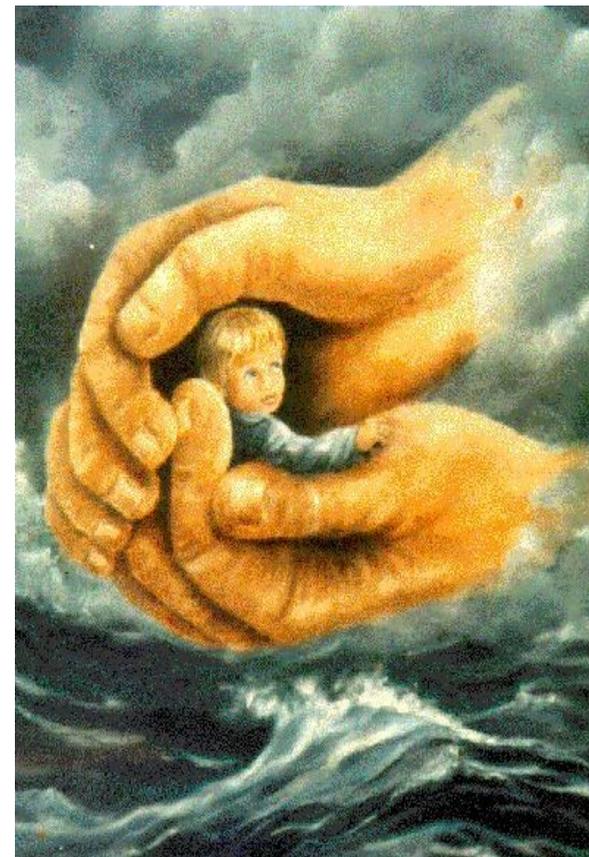
So with us, God was challenging us not to look at the potential of the might-be's or what-if's, but to trust Him, and that whatever the outcomes that He would not fail us.

As we marvelled at the peace which we had over everything, we reflected on those verses in Philippians and the promise of peace:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

These verses indicate that the promise of peace is a natural outcome of having no anxiety, making supplication to God and thanksgiving. Two things struck very powerfully about this, concerning anxiety and thanksgiving.

The Scripture would only exhort us not to be anxious if it were possible. When we are told to 'have no anxiety', it is an active step; it is not



something that just happens. Time and time again we realised that we were in danger of going down a route of destructive thought patterns where we could so easily allow the potential scenarios to grow and dominate and destroy that peace that passes understanding. It was at those times that we had to take hold of our minds and say an emphatic 'NO'. From the Psalmist writing '*I lift up my eyes*', to Paul writing '*if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things*', Scripture constantly exhorts us to draw strength from Christ and not to look down and dwell on the problems. Saying this is far easier than doing it, as there is a very fine line between sensible preparation and worrying about the possible outcomes. All we can say is that as we experienced temptation to step over the line, we felt the warning signs inside and God gave us the strength that we needed to refuse to go down those destructive routes.

Over recent years we have become increasingly thankful for every aspect of our life, realising that everything that we have is a gift from God, from the air we breathe, through our material possessions, relationships and friendships, to the salvation we have from God and that wholly undeserved grace that is ours by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we prayed about our situation we realised that so much of our prayer was indeed thanksgiving to God for all of His provision. We would often sit in bed in the morning praying, thanking God for that grace, reflecting on the privilege of the location where we lived, the view from our bedroom window, for a roof over our heads, food to eat, for each other, for our children and their spouses, and then more specifically for the fact that my condition had been picked up so early and before the irreversible damage of a heart attack. We thanked God time and time again for the amazing blessings which we had, so freely given and so undeserved. We have come to realise, as the Psalmist continues in Psalm 23: *my cup overflows*.

But that voice of temptation was always close by, pointing towards the apparent unfairness of it all - here I was fit and healthy, taking exercise, a reasonably good diet, not overweight, etc., and ending up with heart disease, when we could look around and see others whose lifestyle predisposed them to heart problems, and yet with healthy hearts. How easy it would have been to complain instead of being thankful! Interestingly the last of the Ten Commandments warns us about the danger of comparison when it commands us not to covet. We are beginning to learn what Paul meant when, writing from prison, he wrote, *for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content*. No matter what 'imprisons' us, whether it is health or circumstances, God wants us to learn that precious secret of contentment.

Entering hospital for the operation that peace continued, staying with me as I was wheeled down to the theatre and drifting off into sleep, knowing, as the Psalmist writes (Psa 121), that even as I slumbered and slept, Father was watching over and He would not sleep. What an amazing comfort.

Never having been an inmate before, the time in hospital was an education for me. I rapidly learned that there were essentially two different types of patients: those who were thankful for all of the care which they were receiving, and those with an opposite outlook. How I thanked God that He had brought me to the place of thankfulness, as it made the experience so much more bearable. Yes, there was physical discomfort, the excruciating pain as a chest drain moved, the sorrow of having to say farewell from a hospital bed to Paul & Ashley as they left for Texas, the separation from loved ones, but overall my stay was not an unpleasant experience. And the reason so simply was that I knew that I was not alone and that I was there with Father, safe and secure in His arms.

We now stand well on the other side of the operation, it having gone incredibly well, and with no real complications. The leg, cut from ankle to groin to get a bit of pipe for the plumbing job, has taken a long time to heal, and even after a couple of months still has a long way to go, as indeed has the chest and heart. But I'm well on the way to full recovery. There are signs that I am already able to do more than before the operation, and the surgeon has now fully discharged me. It's now down to me to build up strength and get back to a full and 'normal' life.

Whilst our testimony is very much about God's provision for us, we have been so aware and very thankful for the love and support of so many people. Our family have been a tremendous support throughout, with Adie taking time out to be taxi driver on the daily trek to Plymouth. We are so grateful for all of the care that we have received from so many doctors, nurses and other support staff - apart from the hospital food, we have only praise. But through it all, we have known that we have not been alone, from the many people who have prayed for us from around the world, to friends who have rung us, dropped in, invited us out, the numerous 'get-well' cards, and even to the email jokes which played havoc with the healing process, we have realised that we have not gone through this alone, and we thank God for each one of you as knowing that support has made such a difference.

Our prayer for each one who reads this is that you too can know what it is to rest in Father's hands and to have an increasing measure of the 'peace that passes all understanding' that is so freely available from God.