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**UNEXPECTED**

***Interview***

**John:** We live under this assumption that long and happy lives without trouble and some sort of fairytale land is normal. If you look around the world historically and even today right now it's far from normal. For most people life is a struggle, it is living with loss, pain, bereavement, grief. It surrounds us daily.

**Richard:** Life can be going along pretty nicely and then in the blink of an eye it can all suddenly change. This is messages of hope with Richard and Celia.

**Celia:** Richard I still have such vivid images of watching on the news a car ploughing through innocent bystanders and they had no idea that that was coming.

**Richard:** Hard to imagine isn't it? I remember even as a child we had a beautiful farm and then watching a bushfire come at us and attack us very quickly was quite horrific.

**Celia:** I think it's that out of the blue, that unexpectedness, that can be so shocking. I mean a colleague of mine, her husband you know he goes out for a jog in the morning. He doesn't come back. He'd suffered a massive heart attack out there, didn't come home. I mean they didn't think that was the way their day was going to start.

**Richard:** So why do bad things happen?

**Celia:** Or if there is a God who is good and loving. Why did God let this happen?

**Richard:** So to try and answer that today, we're talking with John Henderson, Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia. So John what are the unique opportunities that you get to do as the bishop?

**John:** Look it's a great job being a bishop, even though it's a very ill defined job but it lets you see a global perspective on people's lives and what's going on in the world today. Because you get such a great overview of the state of the world and of the state of the church and of the wonderful people that God keeps bringing together, it's just mind blowing to watch that.

**Richard:** You must meet some pretty interesting people in your journey.

**John:** Oh yes I do. For example the leaders of rebel armies in the bush in Africa. I've sat with them in their bunkers as they've discussed their lives, their war plans and their marriages! You sit with Aboriginal people in Australia and just listen, those long conversations are so good for us in the western world. We're so quick on fixes and they teach you how to take a more nuanced long view of society and of decisions and of the human person. But I think the greater privileges are actually down there on the local level that you have the chance in Christian ministry to sit by the bedside of someone dying. And to walk with them through that most difficult journey and to be part of that is a privilege that Christian pastors have all the time, that very few people experience.

**Richard:** Yeah it is a privilege. Tell us more about the challenges that you see in the world today?

**John:** Well the world is changing around us but I don't think that's as new as sometimes we think it is because I believe the world has always changed. This is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and when I look at the world 500 years ago it was in turmoil. Absolute turmoil as people coped with new realities and globalization in Western Europe in their lives. We're just another place along that continuum. So as I look at that, Christianity has always been working with a changing environment, people's changing needs, but inside that change our inner hearts, our basic needs remain the same.

**Richard:** So as the bishop of the Lutheran Church, how do you see the world from your perspective and your role in it as the bishop of the church?

**John:** Well I suppose I don't see that the bishop of the church is in sole control of anything. And the most wonderful thing, realisation, that releases you from the burdens of life is to think this isn't mine to fix. We aren't the saviours of the world. The church is not the saviour of the world. Jesus Christ is the saviour of the world and the church is the messenger. So we're not there to carry the burden ourselves. Jesus carries that burden for us.

**Richard:** Recently John was in Namibia at an international meeting of church leaders but things didn't go according to plan. What happened John?

**John:** On the third day I experienced pains at breakfast and I thought I had indigestion so I thought I’d have a little lie down. My colleague at the table said “no!” She said “we're going to the hospital now.” She said I’d gone grey. So we did so in a taxi.

**Richard:** And what happened? What did they discover?

**John:** I went to the local hospital, the Roman Catholic hospital in Namibia. A wonderful place and they put me on the crash cart straight away and about 10 minutes later after testing with ECG’s they said “sir you are having a heart attack but please don't panic.”

**Celia:** OK!

**Richard:** How did that make you feel?

**John:** Um, feel? Don’t panic.

**Celia:** Was there a time, did you think this was it? This could be it?

**John:** Oh yes absolutely. I thought well is this now it? Because at that stage I had no idea what the treatment was or what the response would be and the pain was getting much worse by this stage. So I was actually more worried about the pain than about dying because I thought “I hope I can hold myself to get through this pain.” And I did think about well if I die at this moment what am I leaving behind? Are my affairs in order? Because obviously my wife is back in Australia. My family's all back at home.

**Celia:** What did that mean to you, being away from your home and your family while this fairly significant event is happening to you?

**John:** Yeah. Look I've watched people die many times in my life. I've sat at death beds and I've watched death. I think ultimately we all die alone even though we might be surrounded by family and friends. The final moment of death is a lonely experience where you actually are taken up into the arms of God and no one else can go with you through that gate. So although I was probably concerned about what this might mean for them emotionally and in terms of their grief and never letting me go overseas again! I myself wasn't concerned about that because I felt my relationships were in a reasonable place and there was nothing I needed to panic about.

**Celia:** How do you feel about dying? When things are at their worst what do you worry about? Stay tuned as we talk to John about where is God when bad things happen?

**John:** We live under this assumption that long and happy lives without trouble and some sort of fairytale land is normal. If you look around the world historically and even today right now it's far from normal. It's a very small minority of the world's population who have ever lived that kind of blissful existence. For most people life is struggle. It is choice. It is living with loss, pain, bereavement, grief. It surrounds us daily.

**Celia:** So why would we get up in the morning then if we’re living that kind of life?

**John:** Exactly. We've all got our own solutions to that, why we get up in the morning. I think ultimately we get up in the morning because that's what it is to be human and human beings were born to have hope and we continue to live in hope. I think as a Christian I find that hope for myself in Jesus Christ and in the message of the gospel.

**Celia:** So why do you think bad stuff happens to good people?

**John:** I'm a pragmatist about this. The world is what it is. And we're born into a sinful fallen world. We can't expect it to be perfect. We can only make the best of the circumstances we’re given and do our best to improve them, particularly for other people. I just accept it.

**Celia:** And where is God in that?

**John:** God is there in the fact that God is with you in the struggle.

**Celia:** Can you explain that?

**John:** Well I can explain that from the aspect of my Christian faith where I can talk about the fact that my God is a suffering God. My God is found most clearly in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ was born into this world but not to live in a palace but to walk in the dirt with people, to lay down his own life and to be ridiculed and poked and prodded until they killed him. So if that's who I believe and follow, that means that I’m never abandoned even when I'm in my lowest point.

**Celia:** Did you feel God with you when you were experiencing your heart attack?

**John:** I felt it through a calmness rather than a shining light. God is there in the depths and I did feel that calmness because I knew that I was not alone.

**Richard:** What would you say to someone going through a crisis moment or trying to make sense of it?

**John:** Probably very little. It's more important to sit with them and be with them than to speak. What you don't want to do is go there and try and make it all OK. It is what it is. And you've got to identify that. Don't try to make it allright through some kind of false assertions or comforts that you don't have a right to bring. But to listen and to be. That's how God is with us. God does an awful lot more listening than speaking. This idea that you’ve got a hotline to God and He’ll always answer you is a fallacy, just read the Bible. It’s not true. Even Jesus could say “My God my God why have you abandoned me.” So the question of the silence of God is a very powerful question. And the silence in suffering. Job is another example. People came and gave him all sorts of assertions about God this and God that and all of it was rubbish. That's not what the book of Job is about.

**Richard:** Ministry of presence isn’t there, just be.

**John:** Critical.

**Richard:** Well I think especially when we see someone in pain or someone we want to try and help or someone we want to care for and we look at them and we go “I want to change….”

**John:** You want to fix it.

**Celia:** You do, you want to make it better.

**Richard:** And we feel helpless sometimes to do anything so we do come up with the trite answers and the trite encouragement.

**John:** I wouldn't discourage human endeavour through medicine and other means of care to do everything you can to repair a situation to make someone well. Or to restore something that's broken. But the bottom line is in the end if you want to be there as a spiritual carer you're not there to fix the problem but to walk with that person through the problem. And if you can identify with that, build that bridge, then that's part of what God wants you to be there to do. We also have this idea that the solution rests in the moment. That unless we have the fix right now it's not going to be fixed. But often, and this is true of life, God will do something further down the track that we weren't expecting which redresses a situation which occurred much earlier in life. So you asked me what would I have done if I died at that point. I would have said God has given me my complete life, everything that needed to happen has happened. And if that happened when I was at 60 years old or that happened when I was 80 years old, that was sufficient. And I had every opportunity then, that God wanted me to have, for whatever it was he intended.

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