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ENDLESS LOVE

Rev Dr Noel Due

Let me tell you a story. It's a true story of an old friend. It would be far better if he were here to tell it, but he died a number of years ago, not long after his 90th birthday. It's amazing that he lived so long, especially in the light of what I'm going to tell you.

He was, by all measures, a remarkable man. A scholar, an award winning writer, a decorated war hero, a farmer, a pioneer missionary, a College principal, a life changing preacher, a husband and father. He was a figure of nationally recognised significance. Men like him make the rest of us look pedestrian. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia a few years before his death; and, luckily for us, he was also interviewed for the oral history collection of the National Library of Australia. His books are still in the National Library, and his legacy lives on in the lives of many who met him.

This story is about love, where it comes from and what keeps it going. It's a story set in the midst of suffering, disillusionment and pain. Its setting is Kranji and Changi-the notorious Japanese prisoner of war camps in Singapore, and it happened between 1942 and 1945.

My friend, Geoff, was in the signals corps, and together with tens of thousands of Allied servicemen he spent over three years as a Japanese POW. The Japanese advanced down the Malay Peninsula swift as the wind, a deadly military tsunami. Within no time, they overran Singapore, at that time the Allied jewel in the South East Asia crown. Geoff, leading an attack on a Japanese machine gun nest, was severely wounded. His leg was shattered by machine gun fire and he almost bled to death on the roadside.

In a very unlikely set of circumstances he survived, not just the initial wounding, but evacuation to the makeshift military hospital; the subsequent commandeering of that facility by the Japanese; and his rough transportation to prison camp. The wounds left a lasting legacy. There was no orthopedic team on hand, no specialists to set things right. He said to me once that he couldn't recall a day without pain since he was wounded on the 14th of February, 1942.

In the prison camp he saw what the rest of us only read about. He was there for three and a half years, and his body and soul were deeply traumatised. If he looked down, he could see the bones of his spine through his stomach. He could put his finger and thumb around his thigh and they'd meet. In such conditions men do anything to survive.

He went into the camp with a fairly healthy realism about human nature, but what he saw shocked him. The bribery and corruption; the desire to get ahead and to push others back so that you'd survive; the loss of standards and the endless compromises with conscience. It was not the physical suffering that got to him so much as the mental and emotional turmoil; seeing the loss of integrity and the rank self interest that boiled to the top was deeply painful. Nothing's really changed - it's just that in our society it's all papered over.

The greed and selfishness are still the same. The desire to gain, even if it causes others pain. And the self righteousness if we think that we're somehow above it all. Like some others, Geoff held his integrity. He didn't participate in the rackets or the black marketeering. But everyone eventually comes to the end of their tether. We all have feet of clay; each of us finds there's a point where we can't go on. For Geoff, it was a simple thing. Routinely simple.

The provisions were scarce, the nutritional benefit of the scant food they had, almost non-existent. They called the soup, shadow soup, because the shadow of the vegetables had passed over it. And they'd sometimes get a small rice ball. A roundish lump of rice, no bigger than the palm of your hand and fried and put on a plate. One per prisoner. Never more.

They had been there many times before. Which rice cake do you reach for? The biggest one? (to preserve your own life, but thereby push someone else closer to death) or the smallest one? (to keep your integrity and quiet your conscience). Geoff was at the end of his tether. Did it matter which one he took? Did it make any difference, really? Who'd notice? Did God care? Was there a God at all? So, why not reach for the biggest, and to hell with the lot of them.

Silently he offered up a prayer - something like this. "God, if there is a God, help me. Show me you are real. Let me take the smallest of these rice cakes out of sheer love. Not for self-righteousness. But just out of love, your love." He had no resources left. No love he could muster, no moral reserves to call on.

A miracle took place that day. God heard. He answered. Geoff's life was filled with a new love - and new power to love - which he had not known before. Though no one would have noticed, he reached out and took the smallest rice cake. It was routine. Nothing out of the ordinary. But the whole love of God was in that action, and it was the beginning of a revival for Geoff and many others.

I tell this story not to highlight the man who was my friend, but the God who was his friend.

We think it's easy to love, easy to keep the levels of love high, and we believe that love begins with us. But God's love isn't like ours. Our love runs out. Eventually, somewhere or somehow, we're brought to the end our tether. Our love fails. Our moral resources are expended. Our selfishness takes over. We break the promises we've made, even in the name of love. We up stakes and move off. The clay feet eventually crumble.

God's love begins where ours ends. Our love looks at the worthiness of the object - we love because we get something back. We love the lovely, and hope the lovely love us. But God loves the unlovely. In fact he pours his own life out, to the point of death on the cross; not for his friends, but for his enemies. He doesn't love us because we're worthy of it. In fact, we're worthy only of his wrath. We've lied and cheated and transgressed the law of love ever since our birth. But God's love doesn't hit the buffers. His moral resources never run dry.

His love - the Love which God is - is a gift for us. You can't love out of your own resources, but God doesn't leave you to your own resources. In fact, he doesn't expect you do to anything out of your own resources. Never has, never will.

If you're at the end of your tether, you're right at the place where the love of God starts.

So, what does this mean for you? Simply this: no matter how much you've failed, you've not exhausted God's love. He hasn't turned his back on you or given up on you. If you were God, you might have given up long ago. But he hasn't; and his Son, crucified and raised for you, is for you, not against you. He sees beyond the selfishness of your love; past your failure to love; he sees through the brokenness of your love and the weakness of other's love for you. He loves. He loves you, simply because he loves you.

Perhaps you're sitting where my friend sat. Maybe you're not sure if there is a God, or if there is, whether he's remotely interested in you. I can tell you he is; and he loves and he loves you fiercely. Being at the end of your tether might just be the place where you find that out.

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