

## **What Life Does To Us Depends On What Life Finds In Us**

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Firstly, I need to say a word about the Shins. When you come to this country on an educational visa it gives you no automatic right to remain. There are two reasons why I believe in this case they should have been allowed to do so. Firstly all of Joon and Hyun's their secondary education has been in this country - nearly half their lives. They now have a sense of belonging here that should have been recognised. In particular to ask Hyun to leave just months before he takes his 'A' levels is profoundly inhumane.

The second reason was given by the tribunal judge said when he said he had no doubt at all if the Shins were to remain they would be good citizens, but that was not the question he was being asked to rule on. For me it's a good question when we are deciding who should settle in this country. In his spare time, without any payment Rev Shin began the Korean congregation pioneering a militia-cultural ministry. Mrs Shin is as honest as the day is long. Both boys, coming here with very little English, were heading for University places. Surely these are exactly the sort of people we should be welcoming to stay?

Why are they then being asked to leave? Let me give you my rather cynical theory. In the modern world immigration control is very difficult. In this country we have lost control of our borders. No one knows how many illegal immigrants there are. Estimates vary from half a million to nearly a million. This is politically profoundly embarrassing and the government is desperate to show it is doing something. It is very much easier to deport the Shins than it is to deport drug dealers with false papers who flit from one address to another. The honest suffer, and the dishonest escape. And that is the immorality of all this.

And now let me move on to the gospel for today, of course for the Shins but also for all of us. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "What life in the long run does to us depends on what life finds in us". Let's think about that for a few moments. *What life in the long run does to us depends on what life finds in us.*

Life does all sorts of things to us. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. Most of us at some point will get both and we never know from day to day, month to month, year to year, which it will be. Sometimes its summer time and the living is easy. We fall in love and marry, our work goes well, our children make us proud, life is good and amazing.

And then sometimes life is not like that at all. You go to the doctor with a little niggle, and he sends you for a test and everything goes to pieces. You're having a baby and you cannot believe the joy you feel. And then at the birth something happens and you know what Byron meant when he wrote, "there's no joy the world can give like that it takes away." Just after I was newly ordained I used to drive a moped. I went out one day on a pastoral call and a lady came out from a side road without looking where she was going and I spend a month in hospital. They asked me who the Prime Minister, always a sign they are worried about you. Just for once I was really glad I had a politics degree. The reality is no life is secure. At any moment you never know what life will throw at you. So what happens when life gives you its difficult moments? Well, what *life in the long run does to us depends on what life finds in us.*

Let me take a real example. Rev Stanley Killick was the minister of the little Congregational church in Norfolk where I first came into membership. He and his wife Louise had a child, Robin, amazingly affectionate, but with a severe learning disability. You could not leave him on his own for long. In his forties he would still sit playing with his bricks. Their whole married lives were dominated by the need to care for him. They did so willingly and lovingly but as they said no one really knew how much it cost them.

And yet what a triumph their marriage was. The care they gave him which meant his life was as full as was conceivably possible. The loving family life they maintained. How cheerful they both were. The ministry they both carried on. How did they manage it? In the long run what life did to them depended on what life found in them.

Or take the apostle Paul. What a life he had. He was worshipped as a God; he was stoned as a criminal. He was publicly beaten, on three occasions he was shipwrecked. All his life he had repeated bouts of illness. He might have ended up bitter and cynical, saying why I what did I do to deserve it? In fact he became the greatest Christian evangelist and wrote. "There are three things that last for ever, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them all is love". What life did to him in the end depended on what life found in him.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans he goes to the heart of it all. "We know that in all things God works for good, for those who love him". For him the secret was whatever life throws at us, God will work for good with those who love him. He was thinking here of the inner depths of personal religion, of the way faith gives life meaning and purpose, of how it organises and builds character, of how it gives peace and hope and inner power. As he says "What then are we to say about all these things? If God is for us who can be against us?" He lists some of the things that life can throw at us. Hardness, distress, persecution, famine. No doubt he could have added less than competent government ministers. And he concludes "In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us".

One of the things people sometimes ask is whether our life is all determined, or whether we are free to choose? Here is the Christian answer. We are not determined by circumstance. We are very influenced by circumstance. But we are not determined by it. Depending on who and what we are the very same circumstances can have totally different results.

When we bounce a ball against a wall it returns in a pre-determined direction. It has no choice. But we are not like that. When life puts something up to us we need not react, we can respond. There are choices. You are told you must leave the country. Someone offers you a flat and false papers. How long will it take for the Home Office to find you? If they ever do. You have a choice. The Shins made the honest choice, not everyone would. What life does to us, will depend on what life finds in us.

**One ship sails east and another west with the self-same winds that blow,  
'Tis the set of the sail and not the gale which determines the way they go.**

Look for a moment at the parable Jesus told about the man who built his house on sand, and the contrast with the man who built his house on rock. They both find themselves in the storm. The rains descend, and the floods come and the winds blow. This is the honest realism of Jesus. None of that rubbish of prosperity theology that tells you how some life can be wonderfully easy. We know that is a pack of lies. No the rains descend, and the floods

come, and the winds blow. When a plane crashes the innocent and the wicked are not separated out. Tragedy is absolutely no respecter of persons. Sickness comes out of the blue, to good and to bad.

But now Jesus goes to make the deeper point. Even if the worst happens the result is not the same. In his parable in the end one house has gone, and the other still stands. Some people go to pieces; others have that in them so that even out of the worst something can be made. Look at Calvary. 3 crosses stand there. On one a thief, cursing his fate, another seeking forgiveness for sins, and on the third is Christ. They face the same fate, but how differently they respond.

No preacher who takes his calling seriously can look out over congregations without sometimes reflecting on this. Here we are today. Tomorrow none of us knows what may be coming next. Oh the Shins don't know, but nor do any of us. Ahead may be life or death, joy or sorrow, happiness or tragedy- who can tell? The real question is, whatever it is, what will we make of it? That will depend on what is in us, on the foundations on which our house is built.

Jim Moore tells of a lady he went to visit in hospital called Ann. She was 32 and suffering from a brain tumour. She had undergone extensive surgery and was facing months and months of painstaking therapy. "How's it going" he asked her. "It's been tough" she said "But I'm hopeful. I don't know exactly how this will turn out but one thing I do know is that God is with me - and God will see me though".

That's the conviction that can change your life. Come what may, come what will, let the waters rise, let the winds blow, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, not things present, not things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our lord". Thanks be to God for his glorious gospel. Wan, Mrs Kim, Joon, Hyun, our love goes with you, but more importantly, nothing can separate you from the love of God. There is a God who can make a way where there is no way. There is a God whose love is stronger than death. There is a God whose love which will not let you go. No,

In heavenly love abiding,  
No change my heart shall fear:  
And safe is such confiding,  
For nothing changes here.  
The storm may roar without me,  
My heart may low be laid.  
But God is round about me  
And can I be dismayed?

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