

The problem of suffering

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O God, our refuge and strength,
we hold before you the nation and people of Haiti,
and pray for healing in the midst of tragedy and devastation.
Give comfort to the homeless, the bereaved and the suffering,
courage to the survivors,
wisdom to those who seek to help,
and light to all who live in the shadow of death.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ,
our rock and our salvation.

My text may be found in Psalm 36 and verse 7:

‘How priceless is your love, O God;
Your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.’

Last Sunday, you may recall, I said at the start of my sermon that at a quarter to nine that morning, while I was washing up the breakfast dishes, I had felt the strong urge to preach on the resulting problem for us as Christians implicit in the earthquake in Haiti. It was tempting but I resisted the urge to do so on the grounds that it was far too important a sermon to preach off the cuff, that such a challenging and difficult subject deserved a week’s reflection to do justice to a question which is a serious, perennial challenge to our faith: the problem of suffering.

The problem of suffering can be simply expressed as this: why can a loving God who happens to be all-powerful allow such suffering to take place? If he is a loving God, if he is truly benevolent, then he would want to stop suffering. If he is a God who can do anything, if he is truly omnipotent, then he could stop suffering. So if he would want to stop suffering and if he could stop suffering, then how comes suffering exists?

On Tuesday 12th January at 16.53 local time, an earthquake of the magnitude of 7.0 on the Richter scale hit the island of Haiti. Its epicentre was just 25 kilometres WSW of the capital, Port au Prince, and therefore caused widespread destruction to property and consequent injury and loss of life. In the chaos that ensued, it is estimated that over 200,000 people have been killed and over 3 million people affected. The huge flow of relief aid has been hampered by the lack of infra-structure in this devastated and incredibly poor country (the population has doubled in the past 40 years, 80% of whom are living below the poverty line and 54% in the most extreme poverty).

So when we have such a terrible natural phenomenon as this extremely powerful earthquake, our faith can quite literally be shaken. My starting point is the belief expressed in the psalm we read last week from which my text comes:

‘How priceless is your love, O God;

Your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.’

I believe that God loves us, all of us, just as a mother hen loves her chicks and provides a refuge for them under the shadow of her wings. This is the same image Jesus uses in his lament over Jerusalem: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city

that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.' (Matthew 23 v37)

The first point I must make is God has given us free will. We all have the capacity to decide things for ourselves just as the quotation from Matthew implies. The Jews of Jerusalem were free to reject God by rejecting his prophets and the words of those sent to them. Now the poorest in Haiti have very little power when they exercise their free will but their lives have been affected by the choice of those who rule them. Anyone of us can be injured not through any choice of our own but because some fool of a motorist in icy conditions has decided to drink and drive and talk on his mobile phone when he should have known better. His choice can adversely affect ours.

So much for the Free Will Defence but an earthquake is a natural evil and can hardly be blamed on our bad choices. True, though the current prophets of Climate Change and Global Warming warn us that our bad choices present and past, will result in a future ecological disaster. But setting them aside for the moment, let us wonder why God has created a world where earthquakes and tidal waves happen and that people through no fault of their own can die in the natural process. Has God been careless by his creation of a potentially unsafe world? Like Leibnitz whom Voltaire implicitly derides in his philosophical novel 'Candide', I believe that God has created the best possible world within the parameters of what is possible. The planet Earth is a living planet in a process of change and I

believe that this is the only world possible that God might have created within the necessary limitations to allow conscious human life to exist.

According to an Oxford Professor of Philosophy, Richard Swinburne, the world God has created is not a 'toy world' but a real world in which we are born and in which we will die. We can experience real joy and incredible pain and we are here to grow to maturity as spiritual beings through a physical life. The God we worship is a God who has shared our humanity in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, and he knows what it is to suffer having been crucified. One of the names of God is Emmanuel, 'God with us', and I believe that he is alongside us in our pleasure and our pain. I believe that in the extremes of suffering, our God may not take that pain away but he is with us, even in the Gas Chamber, holding our hands as we die.

Suffering is part of the world in which we live and though suffering on such a scale as the earthquake in Haiti may challenge our view of an all-powerful and all-loving God, it is not ultimately a knock-out blow to our faith because in the face of suffering, we are challenged to act with Christian love not only towards the direct victims of such suffering but to all people.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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