

Suffering ?

7 10 12

Almighty and everlasting God,
increase in us your gift of faith
that, forsaking what lies behind
and reaching out to that which is before,
we may run the way of your commandments
and win the crown of everlasting joy.

Our text may be found in the Book of Job, chapter 1 and verse 10:

'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad ?'

One of the problems of faith is 'when bad things happen to good people'. There is the natural underlying assumption that a good God would not want something bad to happen to me or to anyone one of us. Perfectly reasonable - it sounds something like a spiritual insurance policy in which we buy into the idea that if we seriously believe in God and faithfully follow the religion of choice, then he, God, will want to look after us.

I used to teach A Level and GCSE Religious Studies and the philosophical question posed by the question of suffering can be expressed perfectly simply. If God is all powerful, then he has all he needs to help us. If God is all loving, then he has the desire to want to help us. If he wants to and he could do, then why doesn't he ? Sadly, uncomfortably, our idea of God might be inadequate or the idea of God in

the first place might simply be the product of wishful-thinking. Sometimes suffering, watching someone suffer, can cause some folk to lose their faith.

Obviously, as a priest, I must believe in God – surely it goes with the vocation, the profession of faith. Obviously, I don't want to make light of anyone's particular individual suffering. You know as well as I do that there are some pretty painful, pretty awful things going on the world. It is all very well for us to express comfort and to try to cheer folk up but the pain will be all too real to those who are suffering and it is very difficult truly to know how bad things really are until we have stepped into a person's shoes and seen things from their point of view.

That said, I do believe there is a way of looking at the problem that could provide us with a satisfactory answer. And for that I turn to the Book of Job. Job was a man favoured by God who has everything: a wife and married sons and daughters, land, livestock, money – he was regarded as truly fortunate, a man highly favoured by God. But Satan asked God leave to test Job and God allowed Satan so to do and in the process Job was physically afflicted by boils, his children were killed, his livestock stolen. Bitterly, his wife invites him to curse God and to die. Job's friends come to comfort him and the thrust of their 'encouragement' lies in the fact that Job must have done something very wrong, some secret sin, wrongdoing, for which he is being punished in such a comprehensive way by the God who had previously shown him such favour. In the end, in a dialogue with God, the distressed and confused Job, who never loses faith in his God, is shown that humanity is necessarily limited in our understanding and that we cannot grasp the bigger picture that only God can access.

So in a way the answer to pain and suffering in Job is that we cannot know the mind of God and his greater purpose may well be beyond our comprehension. Instead there is an almost Buddhist-like acceptance of what it means to be human: as people, we can feel joy and pain, pleasure and suffering, good and bad health. We are born so we must all of us eventually die. As such then what is on offer is an acceptance of the real world where being able to feel is a two-edged sword, a double-sided coin. We can't change the fact of suffering, only our attitude to it: accepting the bad with the good as part of a greater picture we can't appreciate but confident that God is and that God does love us even in our pain.

Of course, some people consider suffering as a punishment – and it can certainly be the consequence of stupidity, a direct result of the way we behave or misbehave. Of course, some people see suffering as means by which we learn: a coal miner's daughter, my mum certainly said with certainty that no one puts their finger in the fire twice. But here Job, as our text suggests, accepts a balance that life offers the good and the bad which he puts neatly in a question to his wife:

'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad ?'

But let me leave you on this fact on which to reflect. In the person of Jesus Christ, God himself took on our humanity; he knew fully what it was to be a man and on the cross he suffered and died. As this morning's Epistle from the letter to the Hebrews neatly puts it **'salvation is made perfect through suffering'**. (2 v9)

If God suffered for us, can we reasonable expect life to pain free ?

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

7th October, 2012

H: Sermon 26 : Suffering

