

The Problem of Evil - Epiphany 3 2010

Nehemiah 8 vv 1-10 p492, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 12 vv 12-31a p1153, Luke 4 vv 14-21 p1031

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11 v6).

By and large, the Bible takes it for granted that God is. It is, according to the psalmist, *the fool who hath said in his heart, There is no God*. The experience of the Bible is also that God is faithful. To know God is to experience His **חסד ואמת**, His loving-kindness and faithfulness, His grace and truth. The five books of the Law, the first five books of the Bible, begin with Genesis and its account of Creation. The universe exists and functions by the Law of God. It is because the universe obeys the Law of God that scientists can discover natural laws (or scientific laws) which describe what happens and make it possible partially to predict what will happen. This the same Law of God which human beings are called to obey. It is the Law of Love. It is literally true that *love makes the world go round*. This is the sense of Psalm 19 with its two parts, the first celebrating the way the wonders of the world testify to the glory of God, the second revelling in God's Justice, the last verse praying for grace to live in accordance with that Law of God. Along with the people in Ezra's day we might weep at our failure to live up to God's Law, but essentially God's Law is the ground of our faith and hope and love. As Ezra and Nehemiah taught the people, when they had read them the Law, *the joy of the LORD is your strength*.

On the other hand, our faith in the power and love of God may be shaken by great evil such as the earthquake in Haiti. If God is love, why does He permit such terrible things to occur? Is it possible to believe in a God Who is both all powerful and all loving? The Bible and the Church teach that He is, but can we believe it? People have puzzled about this since the earliest times and have come up with various answers, some of which I shall discuss shortly. These answers may be more or less helpful. None is complete. In the end, you and I are neither all powerful nor all loving and it is not possible for us to understand what God understands. There is mystery at the heart of reality. True faith can never be irrational, because what is contrary to reason is not true, but faith must take us beyond the limited capacity which you and I have to reason. Western commentators sit in their armchairs watching natural disasters unfold on television and say that there can't be a God while the people actually caught up in those same disasters are desperately praying.

One answer to the problem of evil to say that God is good and that evil is created by the Devil. This is not the Bible's faith. We Christians don't exalt the Devil to a position of almost equal power with God, such that God cannot control him. If we did, we couldn't be quite certain that the Devil wouldn't win in the end and there might not be any Kingdom of Heaven to look forward to. The Bible grasps the nettle and assumes that evil must happen within the providence of God. The Devil can only act insofar as God allows him to act. To ascribe real independent power to the Devil would be to deny the omnipotence of God. God is in charge. If we have faith, God's omnipotence is the ground of our hope. If we do not have a lively faith in the loving-kindness and faithfulness of God, God's omnipotence in a world which contains evil is an alarming puzzle.

Another possible answer to the problem of evil is to regard pain as punishment for sin. When something terrible happens to people, we might ask what have they done to deserve it? We do feel a quiet satisfaction in a book or a film or even in real life when the villain gets what's coming to him. And we do feel indignant and perplexed when innocent people suffer. Deep down inside, we expect justice to prevail and rightly so. I would never deny that there is a link between sin and evil. To deny that would be to deny the whole of the Bible. The Bible, however, is not so unsubtle or so unrealistic as to suggest a simple equation – that the good enjoy easy lives and the wicked suffer pain. Often, it seems, it is the other way round; the evil apparently prosper, while the good suffer. When things go badly for us, we are challenged to re-examine our lives and, if necessary, to repent, but it would be naïve, foolish and wicked to assume that the victims of evil are necessarily particularly sinful people or that the prosperous must be being rewarded for their virtue.

I think the most attractive answer to the problem of evil is that evil is a result of God giving us freedom. Human beings get to choose how to live, whether we obey our Maker's instructions and live according to His Law of Love, in harmony with the Universe, or whether we rebel against God and fight against Nature and the interests of our fellow human beings. It is perfectly obvious that a great deal of the suffering in the world is caused by human wrong-doing. Even natural disasters like the Haitian earthquake are made much worse by our human inability to act rationally or charitably. Now, God could have created perfect robots instead of free human beings. We could have been programmed always to do the right thing. In His Wisdom, however, God decided that it would be better to create free people able to make mistakes and even to choose to do wrong than to make automata unable to do anything but what they were programmed to do. If He had done that we should have been God's toys rather than His children.

Only free beings develop character and it is possible that suffering is necessary for character to develop. If we never had problems, we should never need ingenuity to get round them or fortitude to bear them. If other people had no problems, we should never have the opportunity to be kind or generous.

Another approach to the question of evil is to say that, in fact, this is the best possible world. The laws it follows are the Law of God and it is one of God's great gifts to us that these laws are never (or, conceivably, very seldom) broken. If you were to define a miracle as something which happens in opposition to the ordinary laws of nature, you wouldn't want too many miracles. You couldn't plan your life if hot things sometimes burnt and sometimes didn't. Gravity is the same whether you are dropping food parcels or bombs. If digitalis alters the heart beat when a doctor uses it as a medicine, it will also alter the heart beat when a poisoner uses it to kill someone. God would really be doing us no favours if He switched gravity on and off to thwart our bombing raids and support our mercy flights or if He changed the chemical properties of drugs in response to the intentions of those who administered them.

I am strongly disinclined to define a miracle as something happening contrary to the Laws of Nature. God is in everything that happens. Sometimes He surprises us, but there are not

really two separate realms – the natural and the supernatural. It is not the case that God normally distances Himself from Nature and only occasionally intervenes (if He intervenes at all). God is in everything all the time and that is why it is right, as St Paul says, to *rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks*.

Some people go rather further than this. They maintain that there must be things like earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis because any world which can support life in the abundance and variety which the earth enjoys is necessarily governed by the same scientific laws which produce such natural disasters. Indeed volcanic eruptions, tidal waves and earthquakes stir up and provide the nutrients required by living organisms just as they create the stresses which stimulate evolution. People who suggest this may be right, though I do not see how they can possibly know that it is impossible to create a world full of living things with much less trauma than this earth is susceptible to.

If we do define miracle as something contrary to the Laws of Nature, some of us are tempted to get over the difficulty by refraining from praying about natural phenomena - say, praying for the rain we need for a good harvest - and instead pray that God will intervene in people's thoughts - say, praying that those who do have a good harvest will want to share generously with those who don't. When you think about it, however, it is much more of a problem to believe that God gets inside people's minds and overrides their freedom to choose whether or not to be generous, than it is to think that He might get inside the clouds and stimulate them to drop rain. I believe that the best course of action is to follow the example of the psalmist, when he says, *Lord, I am not high-minded: I have no proud looks. I do not exercise myself in great matters: which are too high for me*. Seek prayerfully to align your will with the Will of God and pray naively for what you believe He would want.

Whatever the reason for suffering and evil, many Christians find confidence in God because He shares in the suffering of His Creation. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed, Holy Trinity, is made flesh. He becomes one of us. St Paul says that He emptied Himself. He took upon Himself the form of a servant. He humbled Himself. *He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*. Whatever trials and temptations we suffer, God suffers them too in the person of Jesus Christ, the representative of our human race. We may not understand why there should be pain and death in the world, but we can trust that there must be a very good reason, if God endures it too. We know that He sympathises with us when we pray. We know that He has overcome all the power of evil. Our sins are forgiven in Him. He rose from the dead and we rise with Him through our faith. He opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers and there we shall dwell with Him eternally.

I am, however, worried about a recent fashion which takes this idea of God's self emptying even further. The New Testament Greek word is *κενωσις* and *κενωσις* is a very fashionable concept in modern Theology. St Paul says that Jesus emptied Himself (*κενωσις*) but the New Testament only uses this word once in this context. It is dangerous to make too much of it. Some people want to say that God's self emptying (His *κενωσις*) goes beyond the Incarnation of Jesus Christ – as if that were not enough. They want to say either that God cannot intervene to stop bad things happening in the world or that He chooses not to. The

suggestion is that He extends the freedom He gives to human beings to the rest of Creation so that God is not really in control. If God is not in control, He cannot be held responsible for evil. He can still be all loving. Indeed, you can argue that He demonstrates His love by letting go of the reins of Creation and setting the universe free to work out its own salvation. A lot of people find this idea of a God Who lets go very attractive. At a stroke it solves the problem of how an all-loving God can allow evil. The simple answer is that He cannot stop it. It also chimes in nicely with our modern unease about power. We tend to believe not merely that power corrupts but that power is intrinsically a bad thing. So, paradoxically, a less powerful God is easier for modern men and women to worship. Unfortunately this superficially attractive hypothesis of a self-denying Deity proves fatal to religion. If God does not intervene in the affairs of this world, either because He cannot or because He graciously chooses not to, there is no point in prayer. Neither is there any point in giving thanks. A God Who does not intervene in the affairs of this world is irrelevant to those of us who live in it!

The Gospel reading reveals to us Jesus proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. The poor will hear Good News. The broken hearted will be healed; the captives set free. The blind will see. The bruised will be liberated. All this suffering has an end – an end in the sense of a purpose and an end in the sense of a termination. The end of evil is in Christ. *This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.* Jesus is the culmination of the Law and the prophets, the fulfilment of all things. Perfect God and perfect man, He is the origin and the goal of life, the universe and everything. He is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. In Him everything makes sense. In His life our lives make sense. In Him we discover ourselves. In His Life, Death and Resurrection, Jesus sums up God's purpose for the human race and, indeed, for the whole of His Creation. The whole of humanity is called upon to take up its cross and follow Him into the realms of glory.

Now, what of us who already know Him? In today's epistle we are revealed as the Body of Christ. We are the limbs and organs of Jesus. We are caught up in Him and He in us. So we are caught up in God's purposes for the redemption of the Universe. We are one in the Spirit and that same Holy Spirit has given each one of us the gifts and opportunities we require so that each one of us can play the part God has assigned to us in the bringing in of His Kingdom. Why ever there is evil in the world, why ever there is pain and suffering and death, their days are numbered. God's Kingdom is coming when *there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.* St John saw it in his Revelation.

Whatever the reason for pain and suffering in the world, our calling, as those who are on the Lord's side, is to align our will with His will in prayer and to work with Him and through Him to the uttermost to bring in His Kingdom of justice mercy and peace.