

Why does God allow suffering?

Preacher

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Bible Readings

Job 2:11-13

1 Peter 4 12-16

Mark 8:31-35

Sermon

The question I am going to attempt to address this morning - Is Why does God allow suffering? And before I grapple with it directly, I am going to begin with some background to this question reviewing what suffering is like and what causes it.

Everything I read in preparation for this sermon said this was an enormously difficult and painful question to address. Even our Archbishop Rowan Williams who is infinitely wiser than me – has said of this topic that we can not answer this question and reach a position where we are able to sit back and stop worrying. The reason for this is that that would leave us desensitised and not valuing human life and welfare as we should. Rowan says – *‘We ask this question about suffering because we have learnt to take human pain very seriously and because that seriousness is the best witness to the difference our faith can make’*. *‘No one is dispensable’*, he says – *‘No-one’s suffering is insignificant’*.

All I can say is I have done my best with this topic, and I can only hope and pray that these reflections add to our understanding.

So let’s start with a couple of examples of suffering. Last Friday like many across our country – I watched the first couple of hours of Comic Relief. Sketches, comedy performances and music intermingled with images of suffering from across our country and our world. In our country there were images of the elderly in distress, teenage runaways, those who live in fear of domestic violence and those struggling with

mental illness. From the developing world there were harrowing images of those dying from malaria and HIV aids.

I was particularly moved by the film about a girl called Shamim aged 22, someone who should have been looking forward to a long fulfilling life, and yet she was pictured being carried out of her home in the final stages of HIV Aids. This is not an image I will forget in hurry!

Our Old Testament reading from the book of Job gives another example of suffering particularly of the bad things that can happen to good people type. In the story we connected with Job in the depths of his troubles. What were his troubles? Well, all his children, servants were killed, then all his sheep, camels and donkeys. Basically he had lost everything. On top of that he then got a nasty skin disease. These were the troubles that the three friends heard about and they came to console and comfort him and sat in the ashes with him in silence for 7 days. Job had NOT in any way caused these things to happen – he was the very model of a respectable, upright and God-fearing citizen.

Those are just two examples of suffering, but suffering can take any number of forms – it can be defined in physical terms

- As characterized by agony – those feelings of acute or chronic or crippling physical pain and associated symptoms

Suffering can also be defined in psychological terms characterized by

- misery resulting from an affliction or condition
- Or being deeply unhappy and depressed
- And suffering can also be defined as the impact of living with painful emotions, things like loss, guilt or distress
- Or the wake of some traumatic experience we have witnessed.

Times of suffering can come upon us gradually and build up over time. It can be grinding and soul destroying. But equally times of suffering can come from nowhere and engulf us, upsetting our ordered existence bringing both pain and chaos. One minute we are Ok and the next we are in the depths.

Moving on then to what causes suffering? And this is difficult. Well, sometimes if we are honest about it our suffering is caused by ourselves. There are times when I have indeed been the author of my own suffering. Through the unwise choices I have made and if you prefer this language the sins I have chosen to commit. We all have the freedom to make choices. We need to be honest about it when we fall short.

At a more global level sometimes our authorities, our vested interests and our political systems between countries causes suffering. Sometimes the suffering caused is obvious, sometimes it is more subtle

and hidden. This is probably what I understand as corporate or institutionalised sin.

Having said that there is a third cause of suffering – which is much more unfathomable. Let me clear - I do not believe that my actions or any individual's actions or the actions of the powers that be have always caused the suffering we may experience. I do not believe in every case of suffering that there is some individual or corporate sin to be found. Basically bad things can happen to good people a la Job's example this morning – and others we have probably experienced in our lives. There are too many people blaming themselves for things that have happened (when they are not to blame).

In our epistle today – Peter went as far as to suggest that Christians should expect suffering. It says - *Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal taking place among you*. This suggests that suffering is a reality with which Christians must learn to live. Accepting that as a fact of life is hard.

Because coping with periods of suffering is very difficult. From our own lives, we have almost certainly witnessed that some people never recover, and the dark fruits of suffering can be very rich, and yet for others, there is a real sense of learning and growing through the difficult times.

So enough of the background let's move on to tackle the real question, why does it happen - Why does God allow suffering?

This question even in its tone seems to start with the premise that God should stop it happening. If God is almighty, all powerful and the God of love we believe in, why doesn't God seem to intervene? Clearly the knee-jerk answer to this question isn't a lack of ability, that God couldn't do it or a lack of compassion, that God isn't grieved by our suffering and loving us through it.

The real answer to this question – why doesn't God seem to intervene needs us to look deeply and honestly at how God works with humanity and how he works in our natural world

Starting with how God works through humanity. Our God of love has chosen to work in our world through loving relationships. He is working from the bottom-up from our hearts and our willingness to enter into loving relationships with him rather than working from the top-down, compelling us to love him by force. There is a world of difference between a relationship based on compulsion and force and one based on choice and freedom. Remember how we feel when we are forced to do something – love is the last thing on our minds. God wants

us to love him and love each other, but needs us to make a conscious choice to live the way God intended.

That's God's relationship with humanity now let's look at our natural world. In creation, God has taken a similar by endowing our world with a range of forces, inherent within nature and freedom in how these are expressed. The natural world is kind, supportive and benevolent most of the time, but contains within it the potential for being frightening and dangerous. With our developments in technology, it is easy to kid ourselves that the human race is the master of our world. Time and again, the forces of nature demonstrate that we are not. To allow for our freedom of choice we need to live in a natural world, which also has freedom of expression. God can't just exclude the outcomes when it gets risky or dangerous. The world, our environment needs to be radically and genuinely free to be itself too. Otherwise our important freedom to chose would also be compromised.

God has created humans and their world in a manner where he can't just leap in and stop things. God has limited himself to working within the system he created from the bottom up. He has chosen to limit his absolute power in the interests of loving us genuinely and us loving God genuinely. This approach does not make God a disinterested bystander but one who walks alongside, and weeps as we weep, and who understands our pain and suffering.

How do I know this? How can I be so sure?

I know this because of how God made the bottom up relationship we have with him based on love. That relationship grounded in our freedom to choose in a world not limited to only good and happy outcomes. How God made that relationship was through the path of suffering of his son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our gospel reading today from Mark, which Jo read just now explains how Jesus understood he must undergo great suffering and points to the role the cross was to play in his life and in our lives. It is of course no coincidence that we are tackling the suffering question today as we move up a gear in our observation of Lent, on this Passion Sunday. Where the passion, is about God's passion and his overwhelmingly love for this world. This love is embodied in what Jesus endured on the cross. Through this Jesus brought us into the loving relationship with God that I have been talking about. The cross acts as a stark reminder of how Jesus suffered for us and for all of humankind.

Seeing Jesus in our minds eye on the cross demonstrates to us God's passionate commitment to his wounded and suffering people and helps us to understand how God is in any suffering with us. Bearing the

pain with us. Holding us on the palm of his hand and how God is deeply committed to us and our lives.

For me the cross shouts of our God who enters into our suffering and knows all about it.

Our God who loves us, in through and because of suffering. Our God who shares in our trials and tribulations, takes them onto himself and promises to never leave us.

For me my understanding of God in our suffering is very much like the person looking back at their life on the Christian journey as footprints in the sand, the familiar story which goes like this:

I noticed two pairs of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and the other to God. Every so often I noticed that along the path of my life there was only one set of footprints. I noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of my life. This really bothered me and I questioned God about it. "God, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed you most, you would leave me."

God replied. "My precious, precious child. I love you and I would never, never leave you during your times of trials and suffering. When you see only one set of footprints in the sand, it was then that I carried you."
Amen.

References

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The 'footprints' story is taken from 'Funerals – A guide to prayers, hymns and readings', edited by James Bentley, Andrew Best and Jackie Hunt, (1994), Hodder & Stoughton, London.