

**The Enigma of Suffering: Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at evensong at St Peter's, Nottingham, Lent 4 2018**

People regularly ask me how God can allow all the suffering in the world. We have seen the conflicts in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East in recent months which continue to produce their grim harvest of death and destruction; there have been more mindless multiple killings in schools and elsewhere in the USA; and of course alongside the headline news there is the suffering and death which take place all the time within our communities, through illness, accidents, criminal acts, old age, often leaving deep sadness, regret, confusion and grief.

All these things raise the theological question, 'Why do we live in a world where people can suffer and die so suddenly through no fault of their own?' Is such a world really what God planned? Why, if God is good, should he design or even simply allow a world where such events are possible?' Such questions were asked again and again over that terrible period when the First World War raged. Many turned away from God, and never returned to him, in some cases angry with God for allowing all the suffering, in others just not believing that there could be a God if such barbarity and inhumanity were able to take place.

Suffering and death remain shrouded in mystery, at least when we try to understand the rationale for particular people's suffering. Since ancient times there have been those who have asked why certain people suffer more than others. In the Bible there are various examples of this:

- In the psalms we read of those who ask why the righteous seem to suffer more than the wicked. This seems unjust – why should the innocent bear more burdens than those who, through their sins, deserve to do so?
- The author of the book of Ecclesiastes comments morosely that all is vanity – ie meaningless, empty; there is no purpose to life – people simply live, work and die. Various philosophers through the ages have concluded the same – they can't make sense of life, so one just has to accept this, they say.
- The book of Job considers why a good man, a man favoured by God, should suffer – is the suffering sent by God, or is it a result of something Job has himself done? The question is never fully answered, although Job has to humble himself before God before he realises that God's ways are sometimes simply mysteries to us mere mortals; we can only praise, worship and give thanks to God, because we are so insignificant compared with God's greatness.
- In the New Testament there is the story of the man who was born blind: people asked Jesus – who sinned, this man or his parents? the assumption being that suffering was a result of sin. But the fact that this trick question was being asked suggests that people realised that the answer was more difficult and more complicated; that the reason why righteous people suffered was not clear, and that there were those who were trying to get to the bottom of the enigma, the mystery of why that particular man had to live a life without being able to see.

- This evening's readings also have a bearing on this debate. In the first reading, we hear of the people of ancient Israel who had been living in slavery in Egypt; God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask for their release. But why should those particular people have had the misfortune to have been born at the wrong time and the wrong place, and to live their lives under the shadow of brutal oppression? We can't say, of course, just as we can never say for sure why certain individuals seem to be destined to suffer, and others aren't. In the second reading, from St Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, we hear a different take on suffering. St Paul says, 'suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope'. He goes on to connect this general principle of hope with the more specific hope reconciliation with God, and forgiveness of sins, which are brought to us by Christ.

But this doesn't really deal with the issue of why some people suffer in a way which is surely disproportionate, arbitrary and cruel. So what does the Christian faith have to say about this problem? I would like to suggest various responses:

- Suffering can be a result of the bad things people do to one another – violence, selfishness, war etc. God gave us free will, which means that there are some people who choose evil, and others suffer the consequences. This applies in some cases of suffering but not in those where the suffering seems to be random and arbitrary, such as when natural disasters strike.
- Suffering may be a result of things you do yourself, for example as a result of mistakes you make, harm you do to yourself, not looking after your health, for example; but this is of course by no means a complete explanation of why some people suffer through illness.
- More fundamentally, it may be that on this earth there is simply a limit to our knowledge of certain things, whose rationale is kept from us. We simply cannot always understand why some things happen. 'My ways are not thy ways', says the Lord (Isaiah). But the effect of our attempt to wrestle with these impossible questions is that we are kept humble, and reminded that we are not God, we are not omniscient.
- Leading on from this, we cannot always understand or know God's purposes, which may be beyond what we can discern. We cannot believe that the sudden death of a loved one or a close friend can be in accordance with God's purposes. But maybe it is just wrong to be looking for a 'reason' in God's plan why this happens; think of the millions of lives which are cut short every year around the world through disease, war, accidents, hunger or poverty. However terrible the impact of each person's suffering and death are on those around them, it is a sombre reality of life as we know it. St Paul said to his fellow apostle Timothy, 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord'.
- The suffering and death of someone who is close to us reminds us that we can take nothing for granted in this world. In previous generations far more people died early, or unexpectedly, than today. People were more used to living with the possibility that this would happen. More people

then seemed to be aware of the need to prepare for one's death, and to be thankful for each day which one was alive.

- We also have to remind ourselves of the eternal dimension to existence. Our brief span on earth (and it is brief, compared with the 13.5 billion years the universe is now thought to have been in existence) is not all there is, so our Christian faith tells us. Christians have always believed that our real home is in heaven; as Jesus said to the disciples at the Last Supper, 'In my Father's house there are many mansions', or dwelling places.

But of course none of these points will completely take away the sadness and sorrow of bereavement. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn?" How can we believe this? This is a very difficult saying. That being said, I have found that some, at least, of those who have had to cope with unexpected loss have eventually emerged stronger, more aware of the gift of life that we all enjoy, less ready to take life for granted, more ready to commit our lives – and our time of death – to God in prayer and in a spirit of trust in him. Some such people have resolved to go on and do something specific which will make the world a better place, in an attempt to prevent suffering and sadness having the last word, as it were. Some have come through their loss and sadness all the more determined to struggle for justice, peace, or the protection of human rights.

When we lose someone close to us, we are driven back to the love of our family and friends, and especially to the hope that in spite of our darkness and distress we will be given the resolve and courage to carry on. In times of sadness and grief we often recall Psalm 23 – 'The Lord is my shepherd, I'll not want' (ie we will lack nothing).

Notice, however, in this psalm, that we say 'in death's dark vale I fear no ill'. It doesn't say that God will always shield us from death's dark vale. There will come a time when this can't be avoided. Death and destruction can, sadly, be random, arbitrary and meaningless, claiming the innocent, weak and powerless, as well as the strong and powerful. But at those moments of death, of loss, and of deep sadness we should draw upon all our spiritual reserves and not fear: for we should always hold onto the knowledge, that even if our faith is weak, the love of God will still be with us. Amen.