

Prayer/Greeting (Season of creation)

This morning I want to reflect with you on the subject of suffering. The problem of suffering (as it is often called) is universal and it is unending, which means that it arises (in some way) in culture after culture, and generation after generation. “Why is there suffering?” people ask, or—in the context of religious faith—“Why does a God who is all knowing, all powerful and good—why does such a God allow suffering in the world?” And why should we believe in (or trust) a God who does allow suffering?

I do not have answers to these questions, and framed as they are here, I don't know of anyone who does have answers. Certainly the Book of Job—from which our first reading today is taken—this book raises the problem in a distinctive way—and does not answer it for us. So, what I want to offer here are just some observations and reflections on matters that surround the questions about suffering.

My first observation is to note that—in terms of joy and pain—people generally do not get what they deserve in this world. Good and bad people suffer—which I hope you will agree is fairly obvious—even though many ask in difficult times, (for themselves or others) “Why me?” or “Why her?” And real scoundrels often get away with wrong-doing, paying no price whatever for it. In spite of some biblical passages suggesting a correlation between who we are or what we do—and the reward or suffering we incur—there is little evidence to suggest that this correlation really holds.

There are those who suggest that God allows (or even causes) suffering as a test of some kind. The book of Job, from which we will have a number of readings this fall, tells the story of a man who is tormented with countless brutalities, even though he is presented as such a good man. Job pleads with God to understand why, but although the passage we have today suggests that his suffering was caused by Satan and not prevented by God—this misrepresents the story as a whole. Job himself consistently complains of being an innocent victim of the people around him; he is the scapegoat of his community—he doesn't know why and we don't know why, but that is his complaint, more than the agony itself.

What we do know is that people all over the place suffer—from natural disasters, like the recent earthquakes in Samoa and Indonesia—and from droughts and floods and disease. We suffer from accidents, from evil-doers, and from the betrayal or thoughtlessness of friends.

We suffer in body, mind and spirit from all kinds of ‘slings and arrows’ in this life—because we are sensate and vulnerable creatures—living in the midst of many forces at work in our lives. Some we can avoid—with education, common sense and planning, but we cannot avoid suffering altogether—because of the way we are made, and the laws that govern our participation in the world. We know that God does not just intervene to prevent certain sufferings, though sometimes we pray that God will.

We also suffer from things we bring on ourselves, such as worry. Jesus was conscious enough of this tendency to have said quite a lot about it, including the fact that worry will not add an hour to our lives. Clearly that does not stop us from being anxious—particularly in the hard economic times that now prevail. Still, when we read the passage from Matthew’s Gospel that begins; “Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear” (chapter 6) we can often let go a lot of the worry we carry about with us. It gives us an opportunity to step back to the larger perspective of the Kingdom of God, for which we are to strive.

Much suffering is caused by injustice in society, by tyrants, war, or by inequitable distributions of wealth or land for example. Often we think of such things as preventable or fixable, even though we never seem able to accomplish that—at least on a scale that would make a real difference. Still, we pray for ‘all those who work for justice, freedom and peace,’ and we do what we can to bring change when we can.

What seems most ‘unfair’ to me in all this, (w) however, is the suffering we feel because of love. St. Paul describes love as the highest and most abiding value we know; yet because we love we suffer greatly from the pain or loss of those we love—children and parents, friends, colleagues and pets. I actually heard someone say once that love isn’t worth what it costs us, even taking account of the joy it may also bring to us.

But I gained some perspective on this once from my parents. They suffered the loss of three sons in childhood—their deaths were separate and unrelated, but all tragic nonetheless. My father dealt with it by working harder, but grief caused my mother to more or less shut down for many years.

Much later a cousin of mine made a DVD out of all our old home movies. My mother wouldn’t watch it without my Dad, and he just couldn’t bring himself to watch it. So, one evening when I was visiting them I announced that we were all going to look at the video, which we did after a time of silent resistance.

Now, as you know it is very different to watch people moving about than to just see still photographs of them. Dad sat quietly back the whole time, but my mother kept reaching for the screen, as though trying to touch her boys as they ran and jumped and climbed all over the place. And she kept saying—“Look at them, Obert; they were happy children, they were happy. We didn’t have them for long but while we had them they were happy!”

This experience changed the rest of her life, and in some ways it changed mine too. Suddenly the great loss was put in an even greater perspective, so that after many years, the joy of love eased out the sorrow of it in our family. I never imagined that could happen, or that from this perspective all of us could return to thanksgiving, but we did.

While we all wish for answers to the so-called ‘problem of suffering,’ I think we know that answers would not prevent suffering itself. What we discover instead is that some ‘consolations’ are available to us—if not immediately then in time. In my experience, the kindness and generosity of others has in some way ‘answered’ my pain—even though it was never ‘an answer’ to it.

The other and surely greater consolation is the presence of God in our suffering. Christians worship a God who made himself vulnerable to pain by taking on flesh, by living and dying as one of us, by placing himself at the mercy of the world—which is no mercy at all. If God manifests himself most clearly in the crucified Christ then we can come to trust that God is present whenever and wherever there is suffering.

What this means, to Christians, is that the whole world is cruciform; there is always suffering and joy; there is always death and new life; God is present to us at all times and in all places. Therefore, it is ‘always right—and a good and joyful thing’ to praise and thank God. We do so together, here, today. AMEN.