

Lent 3 2022
Luke 12:1-9/1Cor 10:1-13

Why there is suffering in the world is perhaps one of the hardest questions that we have to grapple with. Some people use the existence of suffering as proof that there cannot be a loving God. But those of us who love God know that, whilst we may not know all the answers about suffering, we do know that God enters into our suffering if we allow Him to. And we cannot say to God that He does not know what it is to suffer, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual pain, because Jesus came and suffered every kind of pain and torment for our sakes. Christians have always grappled with the question of suffering and if you are interested in reading more I can highly recommend: *Where is God when it hurts* by Philip Yancey, *The Problem of Pain* by C.S.Lewis and *A Grief Observed* by C.S.Lewis. *The Problem of pain* was written by Lewis as a Theological exploration of the subject, *A Grief Observed* is quite different because he wrote it in the midst of his grief when his beloved wife had died. One of the musicians in our last church had not been a Christian as a younger man and never went to Church, like a lot of people he didn't think much about God. His wife however was a committed believer and member of her local church. One sunny afternoon they sat with friends in their garden chatting and their 2 year old daughter climbed into the pool, slipped under the cover and drowned. Phil became a Christian that day – he said he had nowhere else to turn but to God. Heather never set foot in a church again because she was so angry with God. The Bible is full of suffering of every kind and it shows us that it is ok to rail against God, to be angry about suffering, if you need some help just look at the Psalms. Take Psalm 13: How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? Over and again in the Psalms David cries out in anger and pain to God But in verse 5 of Psalm 13

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he goes on to say: But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

Some people like to believe in fate or karma. They believe that when bad things happen to bad people it is because that is what they deserve. But they have no answer for why bad things happen to good people. Jesus makes it clear, there is suffering in the world, and we will all suffer. And Paul tells us the same. In fact, all of Paul's suffering was as a direct result of him following Jesus. Had he not met Jesus on the road to Damascus he would probably have had an easy life. Jesus however says, that despite the things that we suffer, we all have a choice to make. Good or bad, we are all sinners, and we all need to repent, turn to Him and ask for forgiveness and be reconciled with God. And then He tells this strange parable about the fig tree that produces no fruit. The owner of the fig tree wants to cut it down because it bears no fruit, but the gardener pleads for it and says he will tend it and the tree is given another chance to bear fruit. The fig tree and the vineyard were both used as illustrations for the people of God, at the time just the Jewish Nation but now it has become an illustration for us because we have been grafted in and included as God's people through Jesus. It is a picture of God's patience with us, but also contains a warning, I think. The proof of our faith is whether we bear fruit. God is patient with us but if we have faith in Jesus and belong to God our lives must bear witness to our faith. It is not about coming to church – although coming to church is important, we need to worship together, to hear the Word, and to encourage one another. It is about changed lives, are we bearing the fruit of becoming more loving, gentle, kind, forgiving, patient and good? Can others see these things in our lives? Are we growing in faith and faithfulness no matter what life is throwing at us?

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There has always been and always will be suffering until the end of time. And until we stand in heaven we will never fully understand why. We live in a fallen world. The vast majority of suffering in the world is caused by people -war, famine, the devastating effects of climate change and even a lot of diseases. Most emotional, mental and spiritual pain is also caused by people. Not caused by the sin of the ones suffering but by the sins of others. But there are still those things – disease and natural disasters that cannot be explained. However angry we might be with God that he allows these things to happen it does not change the fact that each one of us is a sinner and needs to turn to Him for forgiveness and reconciliation. We each have a choice to turn to Him or to turn away. Have you noticed by the way the latest trend to talk about bad choices? So, children are being taught to understand the wrong things that they and others do as having made bad choices. I think that it is on the whole quite a helpful way of looking at it and it might even help us to forgive others for the bad choices they have made that have hurt us. But whether we call it sin or bad choices we each have to face up to and take responsibility for our own sins/bad choices. And the only way to deal with that sin, with those bad choices is to turn to Jesus.

In our Corinthian reading Paul describes Jesus as our spiritual Rock. That passage is dealing specifically with being tested or tempted and of course it is true that sometimes it is by giving in to temptation that we cause suffering to ourselves and very often to other people. Again Paul is telling us there is always the choice, when we are tempted to do or say things that will hurt ourselves or others, we always have the choice not to do it and God will never let us be overwhelmed by temptation – I just couldn't help myself is never an excuse for wrong doing, especially as a Christian because we can always turn to God to give us the strength not to do things that will cause others to suffer.

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We have Jesus as our Rock and our salvation. As for suffering itself, I will let Philip Yancey have the last word:

Where is God when it hurts?

He has been there from the beginning, designing a pain system that, even in the midst of a fallen world, still bears the stamp of His genius and equips us for life on this planet.

He transforms pain, using it to teach and strengthen us, if we allow it to turn us towards Him.

With great restraint He watches this rebellious planet live on, in mercy allowing the human project to continue in its self-guided way.

He lets us cry out, like Job, in loud fits of anger against Him, blaming Him for a world which we have spoiled.

He allies Himself with the poor and suffering, founding a kingdom tilted in their favour. He stoops to conquer.

He promises supernatural help to nourish the spirit, even if physical suffering goes unrelieved.

He has joined us. He has hurt and cried and bled and suffered. He has dignified for all time those who suffer by sharing their pain.

He is with us now, ministering to us through His spirit and through members of His body who are commissioned to bear us up and relieve our suffering for the sake of the head.

He is waiting, gathering the armies of good. One day He will unleash them, and the world will see one last terrifying moment of suffering before the full victory is ushered in. Then God will create for us a new, incredible world. And pain shall be no more and as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 – death will be swallowed up in victory!