

God is not indifferent to suffering - A Christian perspective

God chose to enter human history in the person of Jesus Christ.* He was born in a feeding trough. At the age of one or two his parents took him to Egypt to escape King Herod's slaughter of all the small children in the area. He spent his early years in a foreign country. He grew up in obscurity, probably following his father's trade as a carpenter. He was poor, depending on the support of others for his public ministry.

*The Bible teaches that within the Godhead there are three equal Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, commonly spoken of as the [Trinity](#). Jesus, the Son, took on human nature in the womb of Mary.

Throughout his ministry he was accused of being a glutton, a madman, a drunkard, a deceiver, a demon or possessed of the devil, a friend of prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. He was excommunicated from the synagogue and several times threatened with stoning. His home folks sought to throw him over a cliff.

Finally he was betrayed, deserted by his friends, suffered the worst kind of flogging, and was nailed publicly to a wooden cross. He is described in the Bible as "**a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering**" (Isaiah 53:3). If Jesus is God, as the New Testament declares, and Christians have always believed, then God knows all about suffering. As Dorothy Sayers wrote in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*:

"The God who gave us the dignity of freedom of choice, now takes upon himself the consequences for our wrong choices" *For whatever reason God chose to make people as they are - limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death - he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from us that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it all worthwhile.*

Yet the physical and mental suffering I have described pales into insignificance beside another kind of suffering that Jesus endured on the cross. The Bible says, "**Christ carried the burden of our sins**" (I John 2:2).

In some remarkable way, when Jesus hung on the cross he was taking on his own shoulders the consequences of the evil of the human race. This is the amazing centrepiece of the gospel story. The God who gave us the dignity of freedom of choice, now takes upon himself the consequences for our wrong choices. **"Christ died once for our sins. An innocent person died for those who are guilty. Christ did this to bring you to God"** (1 Peter 3:18). God suffered at the point of our greatest need. And that, for him, meant the greatest possible suffering.

Where true love exists, and where there is suffering, then love must suffer. American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost a son in a climbing accident, says in his book *Lament For a Son*:

God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering world is to suffer... The one who does not see God's suffering does not see his love. So, suffering is down at the centre of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For love is meaning. And love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history.

The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love". For the Christian a true understanding of love must always begin at the cross of Jesus.

James Jones, in his very helpful book, *Why Do People Suffer?* tells the story of a school that collapsed, killing all the teachers and most of the children. A little boy, badly maimed, was rescued from the rubble and rushed to hospital. For hours a team of doctors and nurses fought to save his life while his mother waited anxiously outside the operating theatre. After seven hours of painstaking surgery the little boy died.

Instead of leaving it to the nurse to tell the mother, the surgeon went himself. As he broke the dreadful news the mother became hysterical in her grief and attacked the surgeon, pummeling his chest with her fists. But instead of pushing her away, the doctor held her to himself tightly until the woman's sobbing subsided and she rested cradled in his arms.

And then in the heavy silence the surgeon began to weep. Tears streamed down his face and grief racked his body. For he had come to the hospital the moment he heard that his one and only son had been killed in the same school.

"The tears of God are the meaning of history" We may feel angry with God at times. I somehow think he is big enough to take that. He understands. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16).

The influential Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once put it like this:

"There cannot be a God of love," people say, "because if there was, and he looked upon the world, his heart would break." The church points to the Cross and says, "It did break"

It is this understanding of the compassion of God that is so powerfully revealed to us in through the life of Jesus, particularly through his cross, that can transform our attitude to suffering. During the waning years of his life, Malcolm Muggeridge penned the following words:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at that time seemed especially desolating and painful. I now look back upon them with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness whether pursued or attained. In other words, I say this, if it were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo-jumbo, the results would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the cross signifies and it is the cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the public demonstration that he had defeated the forces of evil and conquered death itself, the end result of evil. In so demonstrating his victory he pointed the way to the final victory, when both sin and suffering would be banished forever from his kingdom.*

"He didn't give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself" What I am saying here is that the answer to the problem of suffering is not an idea - it is a person. For the problem is about someone (God - why does he...? why doesn't he...?). We don't just ask the questions in a vacuum, but within a relationship, like a little child with tears in its eyes looking up at Daddy and weeping, "Why?" Or perhaps in anger, demanding an answer. God's answer is not just to give us words, but to give us Jesus. As philosopher Peter Kreeft puts it in his excellent book,

Making Sense out of Suffering:

He didn't give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself. He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness.

Kreeft continues:

Remove Jesus and the knowledge of God is questionable. If the knowledge of God is questionable, trusting this unknown God becomes questionable...Suffering is the evidence against God, the reason not to trust him. Jesus is the evidence for God, the reason to trust him.

The British philosopher G. K. Chesterton presented a powerful thought. He argued that, for the Christian, joy is the central feature of life and sorrow is peripheral, because in the gospel the fundamental questions of life are answered and it is the peripheral ones that are relatively unanswered. For the atheist, sorrow is central and joy peripheral, because only the peripheral questions have answers and the central ones remain unanswered.

It is significant that Jesus rose from the dead with a body that still bore the marks of his sufferings in his hands, his feet and his side. Throughout all eternity he will bear those scars. It is because of them that you and I may, if we choose, share that eternity with him as "co-heirs" of his glory (Romans 8:17).