

Suffering and evil are mysteries

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 20, October 7th 2018

Anyone who cares about people may well have asked ‘why is there evil in the world and why do people suffer?’ We may have asked it regarding ourselves. Some ask what they’ve done to deserve their suffering, some might wonder if they have brought it upon themselves, others might be not so much wondering what has caused their suffering or whose fault it is, but what sense they can make of it or whether there might be some kind of message in it for them. An example of that could be where a person is over stressed by their job and might be getting the message that they should look for something else. That sort of suffering is good really, in that it leads a person to something better. Mostly though, suffering is painful and makes life worse.

Suffering places a big question mark over God, because if God is good and cares about us, then why does God allow people to suffer and why does God not seem to do anything about it when it happens?

The *Book of Job*, from which we read today and will for the next few weeks, addresses some of this. Even though it may not come up with the answers people want, its very existence suggests that there is nothing wrong with questioning God or even complaining to God about suffering.

To explore the question, the Book of Job uses the mythology of its day, in which God is ultimately responsible for what goes on in the world, but has ‘staff’ who look after particular portfolios. The figure of Satan here is like a Public Prosecutor, in that his job is to examine whether people are doing the right thing, which here means being faithful to God.

Satan’s role in the story is to bring suffering upon Job and see if he remains faithful. Throughout the story Job is offered explanations for his suffering which were current at the time the story was written, and one by one he rejects them all. Over time Job rejects the notion that God requires him to make sacrifices and also the notion that God randomly tests people. Whether we are wrestling with our own suffering or that out there in the world, it is important that we examine what assumptions we make about God here. When we ask why doesn’t God do something about suffering, for example, what is our understanding of God? Do we see God as controlling the way the world works?

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote his famous book *Why bad things happen to good people*, after his son died at 14 from the rapid ageing disease. After years sorting out his feelings, Harold Kushner decided that God certainly was not in control of the way the world worked. He wrote that ‘nature is morally blind – while God stands for justice, for fairness, for compassion... the laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone’. He also said that an earthquake is not an act of God. The act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them.

When we see people whose suffering is caused by others, then we might ask why God doesn’t intervene, or punish the evildoers? The trouble with the possibility of God intervening is WHEN should God intervene? Take for example a parent who loses their temper and smacks their child for misbehaving. That’s not good, but what factors led up to that action? Perhaps that was the only way the parent learned to discipline a child. And perhaps the toilet’s overflowing, and all her bills are due and she’s got a big migraine and now her child is being a brat. How evil is she then? Or what about the Rwandan Hutu about to take a machete to his Tutsi neighbour? That moment came about in part because Hutu resentment built during years of Tutsi oppression and violence. Should God have stopped

Hitler? But at what point? When he was born? But that would have denied him the opportunity to turn out differently. Maybe as he was growing up? But then he didn't exhibit any signs of becoming the monster he became. And in many ways, what he was in the end was only possible because of circumstances which he took advantage of and people around him and historical events. The point is that factors which end in people causing others to suffer are complicated and not easy to disentangle.*

Some ask why God doesn't punish evildoers? That's a great question when you have a simple view of who falls into that category, but on what basis would that be decided? Maybe we think that God striking down someone like Hitler would be a great idea, but should God strike down someone who cheats on their tax-return? At what point should God punish or intervene?

And there's also the truth that everyone sins. We are all caught up in systems, habits, customs, economic relationships and so on, in which we exploit others or treat them unfairly. So we might say that people who force others into slavery are evil and should be punished by God, but do we ever buy products that are produced by slave labour? Or do we fight to free those in the world caught in slavery? Jesus suggested to people calling for a sinner to be punished that those without sin could cast the first stone – because he knew that we are all caught up in it.

Returning to the story of Job with Satan the prosecutor. One of the meanings of the term Satan is accuser. It fits well in the story of Job, because his role here is to accuse people of failing to keep up their end of the relationship with God. That sort of thing isn't always bad, because the real purpose for doing so is to put people back on track - a bit like questions such as 'do you do 30 minutes of exercise each day?', 'have you told those you love that you love them?', 'do you take time out to smell the daisies?' Such questions remind us to do what is important. But they are only to jolt us into line. They are not meant to make us feel guilty or failures. What we have to make sure of is that we don't let questions like those become accusations, so that they oppress us – reminding us we are not perfect, even perhaps telling us we are failures. In the story of Job, creation belongs to God, not Satan. So too, in our lives, when we become aware, or are made aware, of our shortcomings, it's a chance to change or get back on track. Much in the world runs on condemnation for wrongdoing and then fear of putting a foot wrong. The world is God's and God loves us and God doesn't hold our wrongdoing against us. God's voice is the opposite of accusing. It is a loving voice, which we should listen to and let shape us, not the accusing voice, which tells us we should be something else.

The story of Job encourages us to consider why there is evil in the world, but hopefully it will lead us away from pat answers, to see the complexity of the world and the complexity of life, and that in the end, much of it is beyond our grasp, and so we must turn to God for a resolution. Of course we should continue to care for those who suffer, of course we should work for justice and try to change the world to be a better place, but regardless, we must turn to God for help.

One way to turn to God is through coming to worship, where we ask God to have mercy on us (*e.g. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy*). That does not mean we're naughty and are asking God to let us off the hook, rather, to have mercy means to heal. *Lord have mercy* then, means God heal my life, heal my relationships, heal my past, heal my present, heal our community, God heal the world. It means we are approaching God as the One who embraces everything and makes it whole again. We need healing from suffering which comes from living in the world, but also from that which we cause one another.

*Examples from Susan R Pitchford *God in the Dark*