

The cause of suffering is a problem which is discussed more than most others. It is a topic which is guaranteed to attract the attention of many people. Obviously a sermon is not long enough to handle the subject exhaustively but let me suggest one possible Christian approach to it.

Suffering is only a problem for those who believe in a benevolent Creator, one who cares for us; for if life is just a matter of pure chance, no problem arises. Then one is forced to accept the bad with the good. This is why so many different philosophies advocate indifference or stoicism in the face of suffering. Doctrines such as Christian Science (which is not Christian at all!) dismiss suffering together with sin and death, as non-realities; as an illusion. This broadly follows the concept of Hinduism, which states that all suffering is 'Maya', an illusion. That is one reason why there is so much human suffering in India. For instead of acknowledging and facing it, and trying to get rid of it, in Hinduism suffering is accepted as fate, the basis of the caste system.

Some years ago, there was an amusing cartoon painting depicting two babies stripped for action in the middle of a fight, with nothing on but their panties and boxing gloves. The attention of one of these tiny tots has been caught by two butterflies flitting just above his head. For a moment he stands gazing at the butterflies, exposing himself to the punch which his opponent is preparing to let fall on his unsuspecting nose. A little dog in the corner sees the impending tragedy and, with his tail between his legs, he cringes as he waits for the inevitable blow to fall. The caption underneath says: "Gazing at butterflies when the battle of life is on, is dangerous business!" This confirms that suffering can come from the most unexpected sources.

In a real-life situation several years ago, the author of a book entitled "Blind Man's Buff" was sitting drinking a cup of tea at Waterloo Station whilst waiting for a train. Suddenly, without any warning or apparent reason, total darkness engulfed him and, from that moment on, he was totally blind. Now why should that have happened to him, and not to any of the other thousands of commuters who at that time crowded the railway station? Jesus gave a partial answer when dealing with a similar situation. Speaking of a man that had been born blind, Jesus emphasised that the cause was not in the man himself, nor in his parents, nor indeed with God. Jesus went on to stress that suffering, even so incapacitating a case as blindness, can be used creatively. That it can become an opportunity, as St John's Gospel (9.4) puts it: "to work the works of God, while it is day" – to manifest the works of God.

We often spend much time seeking to trace the causes of suffering. Among the more perplexing problems are such incidents as wholesale slaughter and widespread maiming through war, pestilence and disease in Africa and elsewhere. Equally are the calamities in the realm of nature; such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and the recent floods in Japan. Or even those attributable to human error, such as the refugee-boat sinkings in the Mediterranean Sea with hundreds drowning. Or the horrendous fire at the Grenfell tower block in London. Nor is it easy to accept the suffering which results from social and economic malpractices and exploitation. Some

improvements have come about through social and economic reforms, but much still remains and continues to be a mystery.

But for the Christian, the problem has been made more acute by claims frequently voiced in the name of Christianity, which are not Christian at all. For example: in war an enemy bomb drops on a street. Eleven out of the twelve houses there are destroyed, killing all the occupants. The one house remaining is occupied by the only church-going family. Instantly the claim is made that God has spared this family whilst allowing the others to die. This assumption proves embarrassing when in the next street the one house destroyed there was occupied by the only church-going family. Similar ludicrous claims were made in connection with 'Aids' victims, suggesting that this epidemic is God's judgement. During the dramatic floods at Boscastle, Cornwall in 2004, which I very narrowly missed, one woman reunited with her son after a frantic night separated apart and not knowing whether each was alive, said 'Of course, we are a Christian family' as if that was the reason the outcome was good.

This widespread belief that God suspends the laws of nature in the interests of certain people believed to be righteous, has no basis whatsoever in Christianity. Nor is it consistent with sane thinking. For what kind of a world would it be, if its laws were suspended whenever the righteous were involved? Indeed, what kind of a church would it be, once it was demonstrated beyond doubt that all church-goers held an insurance policy against every form of disaster?

Let me hasten to add, this does not make prayer obsolete, far from it. For this is not to say that God is imprisoned by his own laws. Nor does it rule out petitions for specific providence. That is why we have examples of miraculous cures. But no Christian has the right to *expect* protection from the ills which befall all mankind, just because they are Christian; which brings us right back to the approach of Jesus himself. Whatever of good or ill is the Christian's lot; we must accept that as an opportunity to 'work the works of God'. Calvary is the supreme example of this. The darkest hour of history at the time, with hindsight becomes the lightest hour of history. The Cross becomes a throne. The end is but a new beginning, because by it and through it Jesus 'worked the works' of the Father.

This is what the early disciples learnt from Jesus; from the way he used his Cross. St Paul is an outstanding example. In our reading from the second letter to the Corinthians (12.7f), Paul tells of his physical ailment, what he calls "a thorn in the flesh". Three times he prayed that God would remove this obstacle to his efficiency. But there was no answer: God seemed indifferent to Paul's petition. At last Paul interpreted the silence of God in such terms as: "He will not remove my infirmity but he will do something better. He will give me power to use it". To this Paul responds: 'Thank you, God! Now I know that your grace is sufficient and your strength is made perfect in weakness'.

So God will not necessarily remove our suffering but he will give us the power to use it creatively for ourselves or for others. And he will strengthen us to endure it and to cope with it. *That* is the Christian answer to suffering, or at least part of the answer. May God grant that we learn it and use it, productively. As St Paul says three chapters earlier (2 Corinth 9.15): “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift”.