

Trinity College Cambridge
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FROM (BEFORE THE) CRADLE TO (AFTER THE) GRAVE
Suffering

Lamentations 3: 13–33 John 12: 20–32

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Shortly after my Ordination as a deacon I was sent to visit a young couple who were asking for Baptism for their first child. A few Sundays later we had the usual celebration of the Baptism in Church with all the extended family present. Five days later the baby was dead in an apparent cot death. The grief of a parent for a lost child is like no other, be it for a baby or an adult. Tripos essays on a loving God and the existence of suffering have their place but not usually immediately in pastoral care.

In the same parish we curates used to take Holy Communion to a woman who had a terrible rodent ulcer on her face. When you visited, the room was darkened and she held a muslin cloth to hide half her face. Yet her faith in God and his providence was touching. She showed no self-pity but enquired eagerly after news of people in the Parish and it was clear that she prayed for us all unselfishly. You came away moved and inspired.

But in another parish we took Holy Communion to a youngish woman who had been handicapped from birth and now lived in a care home. The resentment she felt towards life was almost palpable. I felt I could never say the right thing. I would wonder what benefit, what comfort Communion with the risen Lord meant to her – and yet we persevered. There is no standard way in which Christians react to suffering. Some are crushed. Some shine with God's love.

I remember visiting an elderly parishioner in hospital at the end of her life. She began asking me about the meaning of life. "What's it all been about?" I was silenced as I grappled in my mind with what I could say to comfort her "Ah well," she said, "all threads in God's beautiful carpet." She lay back on the pillows and smiled to herself. I gave a blessing and left.

She had a sense of being part of something much bigger than herself, part of God's creation. God's creation of this part of the universe begins with what seem inert building blocks from which higher forms gradually evolve. It has been a costly evolution. There is a constant preying and devouring of one form of life upon another, from the insects to human beings. Accidents are part of the character of the world. Pain is necessary to our being as part of the animal creation. We are increasingly conscious of the delicate balance which has been achieved in creation over the aeons of time. Now at the recent end of evolution we see in the scriptures of our tradition a gradual sense that, while suffering can be the result of human wickedness or folly, it is not always the fault of the sufferer.

So Jesus can say about an unforeseeable accident, 'Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' (Luke 13: 4)

In Jesus's teaching there is an emphasis on reacting to adversity and suffering with an unexpected generosity of spirit. 'If any Roman soldier forces you to carry a burden one mile, go the second mile too.' 'If someone wants to sue you for your coat, give your cloak as well.' (Matthew 5: 41, 40) He lived that way himself. So St Peter writes of him, 'who when reviled, reviled not in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.' He continues further, 'who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree.' (I Peter 2: 23, 24)

This derives in part from the words of Jesus himself, 'a ransom for many' (Mark 10: 45) and at the Last Supper, 'my body given for you, my blood shed for you and for the infinite many so that sins may be forgiven' (Matthew 26: 27) – so that there may be reconciliation between God and humankind and between human beings: shalom. There is a sense, expressed differently in the various books of the New Testament, that, in the person of Jesus, God is taking responsibility for his creation – so St John writes of Jesus as God's Word to us, God's word enfleshed, living among us and shining with God's glory. (John 1: 14) From the Hebrew scriptures glory means God's power and character and it is seen shining in Jesus right to the end of his life, who 'having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end.' (John 13: 1) Our Second Reading (John 12: 20–32) speaks of God's glory shining through the suffering (passion) of Christ. If this is the truth, that the Creator God identifies himself with the destiny of one chosen human being and his glory shines through him, then every utterance has its place, including 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?': the cords of the Spirit of love between Father and Son stretched to the uttermost, God taking into himself our human sense of abandonment and despair in the face of extreme suffering.

Is that sufficient justification for the creation of a world in which there is such pain and suffering? Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children is in my jurisdiction. I now meet many more bereaved parents than the couple I mentioned earlier. It is the suffering of children which makes Ivan Karamazov accuse God of being irresponsible in creating the world. 'It is not God that I do not accept, Aloysha. I merely most respectfully return him the ticket.'

Life is not fair. In the course of life everyone has their own share of suffering to bear, some far more than others. Yet most of us can give thanks for life and that is a keynote of discipleship for the Christian. We follow the one who, on the night he knew he was to be betrayed, took bread, gave thanks and said 'Do this to remember me.' Three hallmarks of Christian living are thanksgiving, the sacrament of the present moment, free from guilt about the past or over-anxiety about the future, and having a sense of being part of something greater, part of the body of Christ, 'threads in God's beautiful carpet' We have our part to play. 'Ours is only the trying, the rest is God's business.' (Blaise Pascal) In the face of creation we cry out with the poet: 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.' 'Whence is all this juice and all this joy?' (Gerard Manley Hopkins: *God's Grandeur and Spring*)

'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.' (1st Lesson, Lamentations 3: 13-33)

Convinced of the nature of a God of love it is perhaps no coincidence that Christians have been pioneers in the relief of suffering. I think within my own lifetime of two Christian pioneers in London who have done so much to alleviate suffering, the doctor, Cicely Saunders in founding the first modern hospice for the sick and dying and the City of London priest Chad Varah in founding the Samaritans for the suicidal. Their work of course has spread through the world.

'Christ leads me through no darker room
than he went through before.
He that unto God's kingdom comes,
must enter by that door.' (Richard Baxter)

In the course of life none of us goes without pain and suffering. What matters is how we face it, how we use it and whether through it somehow can shine the glory of God.