



## How can a God of love allow suffering? Why doesn't He intervene?

*A reflection by the Revd Michael Camp*

### **Job 16:1-6, 16-19**

Then Job answered:

'I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all.

Have windy words no limit? Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?

I also could talk as you do, if you were in my place;

I could join words together against you, and shake my head at you.

I could encourage you with my mouth, and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

'If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me?

My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids, though there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure.

'O earth, do not cover my blood; let my outcry find no resting-place. Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high.

### **John 3:16**

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

On All Saints' Day in the year 1755 the Portuguese capital city of Lisbon, was struck by an enormous earthquake. The quake was followed in quick succession by three tsunamis and then a firestorm. As catastrophes go this was, as they say, right up there, 10% of the population died, as well as many others outside the city and the

damage was enormous. The Lisbon earthquake was a seminal event for many, right across Europe and, because the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of new thinking, with new philosophies and new challenges, it led many to ask new questions. What did it say about God? What did it mean to say that God loved the world when there was such suffering about. If God is both willing and able to stop people suffering, then why doesn't he? Either he can't be all powerful or else he can't really love us. We still ask these questions constantly, and so we should.

Theologians set about finding ways through the conundrum of these new questions and justifying God, and they have come up with some powerful potential answers. Here are some of them:

- God gave human beings free will to make their own decisions. We can only choose the right things if our freedom not to do so is genuine, so the possibility of evil must also be open to us. That was a risk on God's part because if we have free will, we might choose wrongly. Very often we do, and the result can be painful, either for us or for someone else. Evil and suffering are therefore our fault, not God's. God refuses to control us and restricts Himself to trying to persuade us.
- The world is a dynamic living and growing organism and it's not possible to live in it without occasionally falling foul of its powerful forces.
- The world is the place of 'soul making'. Suffering shapes us so that we can grow into an ultimately perfect relationship with God. All suffering is therefore in some way constructive.
- God has created a world in which suffering exists and is awful, but he takes responsibility for that and shares it with us. We see that in Christ, who is God, dying on the cross. The cross shows God himself in solidarity with those who suffer. God redeems that suffering by making it the means of our salvation. We honour all suffering by honouring the suffering of Christ.

Those are very brief outlines of some ways of thinking. Do give some time to reflecting on them and see whether you think any of them work

for you. Is all suffering constructive? Could God have achieved his will for us by making the world differently, so it didn't involve suffering? How helpful do you find it to think of God himself suffering? You might want to take some time to think around those things.

All those ways of thinking have something to say but there is one big problem with them. That is that they are theoretical, they don't look at it from the victim's perspective. In the depths of bereavement or pain you can't be rational, you just have to hang on, and intellectual explanations just don't cut the mustard. They are not adequate because so often suffering is simply unspeakable. After some of the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The Western Front; Auschwitz; Hiroshima, let alone more recent stuff like Covid19, it's hard to see how we can have anything to say that can justify the suffering that we have seen, so perhaps the only response we can make is to acknowledge the inadequacy of our thinking. Perhaps we simply accept that suffering just 'is' and that there is nothing to say that will justify it or God, and all we can do is to sit in silence and compassion for its victims.

In the book of Job in the Old Testament, Job's friends put enormous intellectual effort into trying to explain his suffering but in the end none of it works; it is all shown to be inadequate. Our search for answers to the questions about suffering are worthwhile, I'd never deny that, but I don't think the results will ever completely satisfy. Here's the thing. In the end to try to explain suffering away actually makes light of the experience of victims of suffering; it tries to package it up and file it away and move on and pretend that we've got it sorted when we haven't and never will and never should. The Christian response to suffering is one of compassion and humility. We honour someone's pain by staying with it and staying with them, and not trying to move on too quickly. With faith in God and the cross before us we must constantly ask the questions and return to them again and again but we must resist the idea that we shall ever have an answer. That's an uncomfortable place to be isn't it? But it is where we are.

To finish, here is a hymn by John Bell of the Iona community. John Bell, more than any other hymn writer manages to turn some very prosaic experiences into poetry and some really harsh bits of life into faith in God. These words provide such a rich resource for meditation and encourage us to be the touching place for those in pain.

***Christ's is the world in which we move.  
Christ's are the folk we're summoned to love,  
Christ's is the voice which calls us to care,  
And Christ is the One who meets us here.***

***Refrain: To the lost Christ shows his face;  
To the unloved He gives His embrace;  
To those who cry in pain or disgrace,  
Christ, makes, with His friends, a touching place***

***Feel for the people we most avoid.  
Strange or bereaved or never employed;  
Feel for the women and feel for the men  
who fear that their living is all in vain.***

***Feel for the parents who lost their child,  
feel for the women whom men have defiled.  
Feel for the baby for whom there's no breast,  
And feel for the weary who find no rest.***

***Feel for the lives by life confused.  
Riddled with doubt, in loving abused;  
Feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin,  
Which longs to be pure but fears to begin.***