

Dear Friends,

Today we are going to address the most difficult, the most exacting challenge our faith ever has to face. It is the problem of evil, or *Why bad things happen to good people* - the title of a book I once read about the story of Job, from which the first reading of this Sunday's Mass is taken. The problem is this: since God is, as we believe, a God of love and compassion and loves everything he creates, why does he allow terrible natural disasters - plagues, viruses, earthquakes, tsunamis - and the savage inhumanity of people to wreak havoc in our lives? Surely a God of love who is all-powerful would want to prevent such things happening? The word 'allow' is critical here: does God allow or permit suffering to come to us when he could prevent it? And if he could prevent it, why does he not?

I was once visiting a young man in hospital who was laid up with a broken leg: he had fallen off a ladder at work. He belonged to an evangelical Christian group whose leader had been to see him and had told him that with God nothing ever happens without a purpose. This made the man think that perhaps God had caused the ladder to collapse to teach him a lesson, or because he was displeased or even angry with him for some reason. What could that reason be? What could he have done to make God treat him in this way? When I saw him the young man was in quite a state and getting very worked up over these questions.

I tried to say to him that what he had suffered was a simply an accident, a mischance, the sort of thing that will happen in this sort of world - and that this world is created by God certainly, but he is not all the time making things happen in it out of anger or to teach us lessons. Nevertheless what happens to us can be like messages from God, alerting us to the reality of our situation and leading us to place trust and hope in him. If the man could believe that God was with him, in his time in hospital, as everywhere else, alongside, loving him, this might help him to come through this difficult period - where false ideas about God and how he works would only make him question himself and his faith and maybe even turn him against God. Here may be the germ of an answer to the problem of evil, or at least such answer as is available to us.

The book of Job raises the issue in a very acute form. Job is a good and righteous man who is blessed with family and riches. In a series of disasters he loses everything and is reduced to abject despair. The short excerpt we hear in the Sunday Mass expresses well the state of feeling he is brought to, that life is hard and pointless, mere endless drudgery, hopeless and joyless. Friends of Job come to him to sympathise and suggest ways of responding to his situation. Through it all, despite what he is enduring, he refuses to give up on God: 'if we accept good things from God, must we not accept bad things as well?' he says.

Job eventually hears the voice of God speaking to him from the whirlwind, and what God says in effect is ... I am God! I am the creator of all that is, the whole universe with all its wonders, who are you to question me? This does not answer the problem of evil, but maybe in the end it is the only answer we can have. If we believe in God at all, we will need to acknowledge that God goes beyond our understanding - he could not be God if that were not so - and therefore that there will be questions our beliefs suggest which we cannot answer, but must simply live with. The hope is that we can live with them without their impairing or disabling our faith, as was certainly the case with Job. (In the story he is

vindicated in the end and his prosperity restored).

I think this kind of honesty will be more attractive to people who might come to share our faith than pretending to have all the answers. You could perhaps make up a watertight case for believing in God, proving that he exists, that he is what we believe him to be, but it would not necessarily help or lead anyone else to believe in him unless they have a personal relationship with God of their own. It is not knowing *about* God that makes the difference, but *knowing* God, knowing him as one might know a person - and being able to love a person without knowing everything about them that is to be known.

Our Christian faith is above all a personal faith. It is not a series of ideas or theories about the world and its nature and how it works, it is centred on the presence of God in our human situation, focused in the person of Christ himself. As we heard last Sunday, people responded to him because, unlike their other religious teachers, he taught with *authority*. There was a special quality apparent in him which attracted people to him and led them to recognise, as the centurion at the cross did, 'Truly this is the Son of God.' His divine authority was, to be sure, seen in his works of healing and feeding and forgiving, but it was not so much the works themselves, but that special quality of his personal being that made people see the hand of God at work in him.

So it is for us, and so it must be in our Christian faith. We are Christians not because we believe this or that, but because the human-divine life that is in Christ is present through Christ in us also. We can be aware of it in ourselves, in our lives, in our prayer and sacraments, in the words of the Scriptures.

The answer to the problem of evil, therefore, is that there is no answer - no answer that we can apprehend in the here and now.. It is part of the mystery of God, the God who lives in Christ, whom we can know and allow to be in ourselves: if we do that, then unanswerable questions will not loom less large or affect us any less, but they will never be the last word - that word is always Christ who is *the* Word, the Christ who lives among us and in us, who suffers, dies and rises to new life, so that we can come to share the life of God in him fully, perfectly in his Kingdom - both here and now and in the world to come.

Wishing you every blessing,

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