

Christ Church Virginia Water 9.2.2008
WHY DOES A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING

At the time I had been a clergyman for 6 years. And during those 6 years I had been asked the question dozens of times. Why does a good God allow suffering? Some asked in the midst of their own pain and tragedy. I remember it being asked at the funeral of a three years old girl. I remember it being asked at the bedside of a 40 years old with cancer. The sadness of loss and the pain of illness had triggered the question in people's minds, 'If God is good why does he allow this person to suffer, that person to die young?'

Others asked the question in the midst of philosophical thinking. The question not triggered by personal suffering, but triggered by general observation. They looked at the world, and what they saw disturbed them. An earthquake devastating a village in China, a famine decimating a population in Ethiopia . A typhoon ruining a village in the USA. A war ravishing a nation. And they looked at the world in a mess and ask the same, 'Why does a good God allow suffering? If God is good he wouldn't allow such suffering. Conclusion either God isn't good or God can't do anything about it; he's not God. And if God isn't God or God isn't good, then they didn't want anything to do with Him.

In those first 6 years of ministry I had done my best to answer the questions of God, goodness and suffering. But then I had the opportunity of finding out whether the answers I had done my best to give actually squared up when I suffered myself.

I had been married to Ruth for 5 of the 6 years I had been in ministry. They'd been years of fun and happiness. We were living and working in London and come the beginning of December 1989 we had saved up some newspaper vouchers to have a day trip to France. An opportunity for a enjoyable day out, a chance for some foreign Christmas shopping. We took a couple of friends with us for the day. But we never made it even to Dover.

We were involved in one of those multi-car motorway pile ups. I hardly remember it at all. I was left unconscious. Ruth was sitting in the back of the car, in the days before rear seat belts were compulsory. She was killed. I didn't know that for some hours. I had broken my back, my jaw, and lost the sight of my right eye.

For the first few days I was too numb to emotionally take in what had happened. I knew Ruth had died, but I was in hospital drugged up, and undergoing surgery to insert a metal jaw in my face. I don't think I shed many tears in those first few days. But I did when I went home. And in the tears came the question I had been asked so many times before. Why? And as I asked it many others did too. Why?

Indeed my sadness at losing a wife was in some ways greater for Ruth's mother. For this was the second child that they had lost. At that point two of three daughters had died. Imagine the pain for her. Imagine it more so when three years after Ruth died I stood

with her at the graveside of their third and last daughter, Heather. She died in 1992 at the age of 33 from cancer. But then in 1994 Ruth's mother lost her husband. A sudden heart attack. He never made it to hospital. I had lost a wife and Gwen had lost all three of their children. None of them reaching the age of 35. And then losing her husband. I remember clearly sitting by her fire after the funeral, tears in her eyes, as she asked the question, Why?

Now let me say that the question is not new. In the Bible there is the story of a man who suffered much more than I did or ever am likely to. His name was Job. He was a godly man, happily married and with 10 children. They were all killed in a hurricane. And Job himself was afflicted with terrible illness. And he asked the same question, why? His friends asked the question too. Because to ask the questions is normal and natural. Job and his friends are never rebuked by God for their question. It was their answers that they got so wrong.

Why does a good God allow suffering? As I asked it in the sadness of losing a wife I don't think I changed the answers I had given others before. All I could do was prove in experience the truths that Bible gives us as we cope with what is a bewildering topic.

And I'd like to share those truths with you this morning. They don't answer every sub question that you may think of, but they give us a framework from which you might want to ask questions afterwards. I've got 5 brief points.

1). SUFFERING WAS NOT PART OF GOD'S ORIGINAL CREATION.

The first 2 chapters of the Bible give God's account of the creation. Whether literal or poetic doesn't matter much for what we have is an account of creation as God meant it to be. And one refrain runs through the days of creation as letters run through a stick of rock. And God saw that it was good. Each stage of the creation, on the first three days the creation of environments and the second three days inhabitants for those environments, is marked out by the declaration that it was good.

And then after the creation of man and woman the climactic refrain is told us.. Genesis 1:31

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was morning, and there was morning -- the sixth day. (NIV)

The opening chapters of the Bible tell us how things were meant to be. God's people Adam and Eve living in God's place, the garden of Eden, enjoying God's blessing as they obeyed his single rule not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with God. It's poetically described in terms of God being able to walk through the garden and talk with them. Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with each other. They were able to walk naked before each other as

a symbol of total openness in relationship. They had nothing to hide and nothing to cover up in their relationship with each other. I have now married again to Joanna. Close as we are there are some things, thoughts and attitudes, that I would be embarrassed for her to know about. Adam and Eve had no such shame. They enjoyed a perfect relationship.

And Adam and Eve in perfect relationship with creation. All the animals were there with them in the garden. A lion and a lamb together. The lion didn't eat the lamb and didn't eat Adam or Eve either.

That is the perfect creation begun by God. And what a wonderful description it is. God's people in God's place enjoying God's blessing. Adam and Eve in perfect relationship with God, with each other and with the creation itself. A situation that would have carried on for eternity.

But you don't need a PhD to know that's not the world that we live in. Which leads me to my second point.

2). SUFFERING IS THE RESULT OF MANKIND'S SINFULNESS.

Adam and Eve were not content to obey the single rule that God had established that would be their free choice demonstration of their love for Him. They rebelled against God. They doubted his goodness and disbelieved him when he said there would be dire consequences of rebellion against Him. A just and holy God must punish sin. Must deal with rebellion. In fact to be consistent with what he had said he had to carry out the sentence of death he warned about.

And so Genesis Ch 3 outlines the action God takes on rebellious mankind. And what Adam and Eve did in the garden all of us have done too. Without exception. All of us have rebelled against God and His rule, or law or word. Some do it through apathetic indifference, some through open hostility. But we've all done it. THE LIE TEST.

The sentence God issues on Adam and Eve is sentence issued on us all. Because what they did we've done. The sentence of death they deserved and experienced we deserve and experience too.

And so those 3 creation relationships are all broken. Between Adam and Eve. They start to blame each other. They were clothes symbolic that their openness has gone. And God as he pronounced judgement says that the battle of the sexes begins. Genesis 3:16

¹⁶ To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (NIV)

Mankind can no longer live as he should. Even the best relationships now are not what they were. And many are much worse. In families, between individuals, among countries.

People unable to relate to each other properly. All human relationships bear the marks of this fall.

The relationship with God was broken. No longer do we know Him as friend. No longer can he walk about among us. The death he sentenced us to was a spiritual death as well as physical.

The relationship with creation was broken too. Working the ground became hard toil. The animals were no longer all tame. And Adam and Eve were expelled from a perfect garden to a fallen creation. From the safety of a perfect garden to the danger and hostility of a world that God had cursed. So much so that God said that we would all return to the dust we were made from. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. All would physically die just as all would spiritually die in separation from God.

Physical death is the one universal statistic. 100% of people die. It was Woody Allen who remarked that he didn't fear death he just didn't want to be around when it happened. But he will be.

Expelled from the garden. And the Bible's view is that was ironically part of God's love and goodness. The OT says that a perfect creation can't have imperfect man living in it. A place where God lives, a holy place. Like the garden couldn't have unholy, sinful rebellious people living in it. So what choice did God have. To leave the garden intact and obliterate mankind. Or to curse the creation and have a fallen creation, not holy, where imperfect mankind could dwell. That is the route God takes. He curses creation, making it fit for unholy mankind to inhabit. He doesn't wipe off the human race from the planet.

So suffering is the result of man's sinfulness. Either directly or indirectly. Much suffering is the result of man's inhumanity to man. Take the Dublin shooting for example. The result of man's evil. The famine in Sudan is the same. The world produces enough food for all to eat. That they don't all eat is the complex evil of politics, nationalism, greed and unloving selfishness.

Suffering is also the result of us living in a fallen world. A world cursed by God so we could continue to exist. So we live outside the garden. In a world where there are earthquakes, typhoons and hurricanes. A world where there is disease sickness. A world where we all physically die.

Suffering is the result of man's sinfulness. Not all individual suffering is the result of individual sin, but nonetheless the Bible makes the link clear. All suffering is the result of living in a world where we all sin. But why did God allow us to continue in that fallen world. Why not end the whole shooting match. Why let us carry on in this fallen state. The answer is that God had a plan.

3). SUFFERING WILL ONE DAY BE ENDED.

God's plan is to restore mankind back to the situation that existed in the garden of Eden. His plan was to send His son Jesus into the world to take the penalty, the eternal death of separation from God, on himself. At the cross God's justice is satisfied, the penalty for our rebellion is paid. And so just as the first two chapters of the Bible described how things were in the garden so the last 2 chapters describe how things will be one day in the future. How things will be in eternity. Let me read to you a couple of verses.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (NIV)

Its the same pattern as the garden of Eden. Here are God's people living in God's place enjoying God's blessing. The three H's of suffering will be removed. There will be no more hearses. For there will be no death. Life will be eternal for those who are there. There will be no more handkerchiefs, for there will be no more crying. Every tear will be wiped away. Kleenex will be out of business. And there will be no more hospitals, for there will be no more pain. All suffering will be ended. The old order, this fallen world will have passed away.

Suffering will one day end. And this heaven will be like the garden. Full of beauty and empty of pain.

But again you don't need a PhD to know that we're not there yet. That this world is not this new heaven. And why not?

4). SUFFERING IS ALLOWED IN THE MEANTIME FOR OUR SAKE.

God will one day bring in this paradise that was lost but will be regained. And then all suffering will end. But why doesn't he do it now? Why doesn't he rid the world of evil today? Why doesn't he stop my friends suffering now? They are good questions. And the bible's answer is that when we want God to end suffering, we really want him to end the world. Otherwise where should he draw the line. To stop my suffering but not yours. No instead God will end all suffering on the same day. The last day.

But he hasn't yet. And the Bible's view is that he hasn't out love for us. Because when he does rid the world of suffering all those who rebelled against Him, which is all of us, but who haven't turned round and accepted what His Son did at the cross, and surrounded

again to His rule, will be left out of this new heaven. Will be separated from Him for eternity. And that thought is even more awful than any suffering now. The Bible calls it hell. Its the opposite of Eden, the opposite of heaven. A place with no beauty, no colour, no relationship, no friendship. Here will be nothing of God in that place. Hell indeed.

God will one day end suffering, but to do that will also bring an end for all who have not responded to what God has done in Christ.

Listen to how the apostle Peter puts it, in a passage in the NT that explains why God hasn't brought about the last day yet. Why Jesus hasn't returned yet.

2 Peter 3:8-9

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (NIV)

God delays the last day, delays paradise regained in order to give time to people to turn round to Himself. To repent. To come to know Him now and so know Him for eternity.

I've been a Christian for 32 years and I am glad that Jesus didn't return the day before I became a Christian otherwise I would outside for heaven for eternity. God delays the end in order to give people time to turn to Him. God is pained by suffering, by evil, by death, by sickness. His original creation had none of it. But he allows it, he puts up with the child abuser, the IRA bombers, the Dunblane killer until he judges them on the last day to give others time to repent and come to know Him. He could end it all today. But suffering is allowed in the meantime for our sake.

Why does a good God allow suffering? Its not out of a capricious nature. Its not out of impotence. Its because the alternative to is to end the world now, and that would mean people missing the opportunity to enter into relationship with Him now and enjoy the new creation for ever. That God allows the suffering that results from man's sinfulness, both from his evil and from being sent out from the garden, is in fact His eternal goodness.

But let me end with a final point. Important I think, lest we think that as we suffer God is somehow remote from it, or detached from it.

5). SUFFERING IS SOMETHING GOD HAS EXPERIENCED.

God is not sitting in his heaven as in some ivory tower. God had been here. The message of Christmas, the Incarnation, is that God has been part of our world. Simon Jenkins puts it like this in a poem.

Like your landlord becoming your lodger
like your managing director up before you for an interview
like Beethoven queuing for a ticket to his own concert
like a headmaster getting the can
like a good architect living in a slum built by a rival
like Picasso painting by numbers
God lived among us

God knows our suffering. In Jesus he's been part of it.

Jesus experienced bereavement. He wept at the graveside of a friend.
Jesus experienced humiliation at the cross, as people mocked him
Jesus experienced pain, as they beat him again and again at the cross
Jesus experienced rejection as he was abandoned by God at his death. He cried out, 'My God my God why have you abandoned me'.

God is not remote from our pain. Indeed Jesus experienced pain just as we do. God rolled up his sleeves and became part of his creation and there experienced all the suffering of living in a fallen and sinful world. Ultimately to die at the hands of sinful people.

Suffering is real. When my first wife died I experienced its trauma, its pain, its anger. But God was not off his throne in it all, and God had not suddenly become unloving in it all. Why me? I can't answer that. No information is given as to why me and not him. However these great truths of the Bible helped me put suffering into its eternal context.

Its not part of the original creation
Its the result of mankind's sinfulness
It will one day end and be replaced by a new heaven
It is allowed in the meantime so that people can turn round and come to know God.
And in it all God is not remote, but can care and support and strengthen us as one who himself suffered for our sake.