Our Suffering God

Good Friday

One of the hardest things to understand in this life is undeserved suffering: terrorist attacks, earthquakes and tsunamis, painful deaths from cancer, ebola and now coronavirus. What was God's intention when he created a world where so much pain could evolve? And what is his answer when tragedy strikes? How many of us had had opportunity to raise our hands to heaven and shout, "Where are you God? Why did you let this happen"?

As we look at the cross today, we receive God's answer, or as much as we are going to get. God does not ignore the suffering of the centuries. Nor does he try to explain it. Instead, he walks right into it: faced with the awful truth of his coming execution, Jesus responds, "And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (John 12:27).

The shocking truth of Good Friday is that the tormented man hanging on the cross is the truest picture of God the world has ever seen. But because he had taken on full humanity, Jesus did not easily accept his destiny. The author of Hebrews writes, He "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him" (5:7). The Greek word here for cry (*kraugē)* in this passage is not a simple wail, but an agonised groan straight from the heart resulting from overwhelming and searing pain. There is no human agony or suffering through which Jesus has not come.

For many people the world today seems very much to be a Good Friday world. With global coronavirus cases approaching two million, deaths in the tens of thousands, businesses collapsing and unemployment soaring, we hear of parents unable to be with their dying children; laid off workers, desperately wondering how to feed their families; health care workers struggling with crowded hospitals and inadequate protection gear; and the exhausted doctor at the end of a 12 hour shift who says, "I'm going home to scrub the virus off my body, but I can't scrub it off my soul".

And absorbed as we are with this desperate situation, we seem to have almost forgotten terrified Syrian children in bombed out houses, widespread hunger in Africa and Asia, devastation in Yemen and refugees and migrants drowning in the Mediterranean.

There will always be tragedy and suffering in the world, but in these difficult days we find there are also countless examples of selfless caring: We all

know of the dedication of healthcare workers and others in the front line. In addition, individuals are regularly checking on vulnerable neighbours, milkmen, postmen and others are delivering groceries, flowers and good wishes, teenagers are singing outside retirement homes; and children are drawing rainbow pictures to hang in windows and brighten up people's days. In this trying time, we are all learning the true meaning of compassion and unconditional love.

A world without suffering would certainly be a different world. But a world without compassion is unthinkable. And such a powerful and important emotion as human compassion would not be possible without some level of suffering.

Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster cathedral has posed the question, "Does my creator weep"? Theologians and philosophers have wrestled with that question for centuries. Some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, the Book of Job tries to make sense of it and fails. There is only one answer to the question "does my creator weep"? And it stands in our midst today: the cross that holds the tormented body of Jesus of Nazareth.

God does not send suffering into the world to test or punish us. Instead, he enters into it himself, carries us in our sorrow and weeps alongside us. As we remember Christ on the cross, let us give thanks for his love and passion for justice and mercy which will not cease until every death from war or hunger, every act of selfishness, every cruelty large or small has been halted by the power of forgiveness, healing and God's unconditional love.

Amen

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