

WHAT CAN CHRISTIANITY DO FOR YOU?

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FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

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Talking recently with the mother of a severely handicapped daughter, I was conscious that various things were happening and being experienced which broadened the concept of suffering for me. I don't know a great deal of detail but this girl, whose photograph I saw, radiated joy even from that slim piece of evidence. Her mother obviously adored her, and received from her great joy. Only someone in such a position could be a witness for the defence, in a trial of who suffers most. The mother's evidence was presented with such sincerity and truth that there was no gainsaying it. At the end of our conversation I got the idea in my head that I must ask the mother to pray for me at this exact time, when I would be talking about matters I know little of on a practical level, and would need all the help I could get, particularly from someone so intimately involved with what we might call, front line suffering.

I look on the suffering of the world with a complex response of thanksgiving for all I have received and do receive that buffers the hard edge of suffering that is all around me, coupled with a sense of complete inadequacy in dealing with it in any significant way. I hardly know what the word suffering can mean, and when I do try and conjure up the meaning it has had for me, I go back to broken arms on the rugby field, the trauma of being sent away from the nest at the age of 8 into a completely alien school environment with only a pet newt to keep me company. It was indeed something just like Tom Brown's Schooldays and strangely I found it quite in keeping with my skewed nature. One adjusted and one made friends, particularly with a boy, who I am still in touch with, whose mother had just died. We were fed, we played, we laughed, we had space, and we had hope in a situation which some might have considered completely impossible.

Suffering is a very odd thing. As a world issue we make up our minds about it mainly from reports in the media. That dependence on the media can make it both less likely that we understand the real situation, because we don't actually feel the hunger or the loss as we would do if it was our own hunger and our own loss, and yet the media does give us a wider general picture of suffering. With regard to the media and suffering, we know more perhaps, but feel less about it. Suffering becomes a fact, not a felt reality. Things strike us about other people's suffering, in ways that the one suffering, may not even feel themselves when they are in amongst it.

Say, one of the members of our family is in hospital. Those outside the situation often have to guess what it's like. Those inside the situation have around them all the activity and support of the doctors, nurses, chaplains, and cleaners, all of whom make a difference; even if it involves a death of someone dear to us. When we personally are involved in what others may well assume is the worst sort of suffering, they might not have been able to put into the situation all those extra things that help to make the unbearable bearable, the faces of the nurses, the kindness of the doctors, or those who sit through the night, watching and praying, and the chaplains bringing the sacrament,

and saying prayers. At this point of course, I am on sacred ground, but involvement with suffering can often be a very different experience from what we automatically assume from the outside. There are some amazingly saintly people out there who can help make suffering bearable in both the short term, and in the long haul of bereavement and disability. Yet having said that, nothing I imagine could lessen the immediate shock of a tsunami, or the 'twin towers'; and also on a more personal level the trauma of violence, and kidnap, child murders, or torture. However bad things are the help of loving friends, and the skill of the medical and psychological services do an amazing job. Suffering can seem like a world within a world, and within that world much goes on that will surprise us, and some experiences will shame our ignorance, and some will bring us to tears of thanksgiving, but as I say, no definites.

That is an experiential sort of introduction and I would like to move on now to the central part of what I want to say, which involves the nature of faith and how that plays its particular part in our understanding and experience of suffering. If you think seeing different sorts of suffering and how they can be helped is a big subject, then it pales into insignificance when you add the concept "*Why suffering?*" On a neutral level (i.e. without casually bringing the deity into the discussion) pain might be a more suitable word than suffering. Along with the animal world, and in this sense the human is very similar to the animal, we feel physical experiences, some pleasant some painful. That is pretty amazing in itself, but the consequences of that are huge for the way we think and behave, and understand ourselves. We flee from pain and are attracted to pleasure, on the whole, and in the animal kingdom that seems to be about it; but human beings have the added capacity (whether we use it or not is another matter) to control these responses in very sophisticated ways, by thought processes and language, and by attention to history, and by complex decision making. We have begun to conquer pain, we have strategies of aid to help the poor, we have counselling services, in-depth psychology, and medicines, not throughout the world, and not for want of trying, but pretty broadly in place, and all these make a big difference to the amount of pain we feel.

There remains the big question for those who believe in God: why does God who is all-powerful allow suffering? Why was suffering included in the structure of being at all? Could God not have made a world without suffering? Such questions are a bit too big for most of us; and yet one question which does still linger in a vestigial way in a society without much acknowledged interest in faith, may be "Where was God when my child died?" Is God a reality in the experience of suffering, and if so, how?

I can quite see when a person is only nominally Christian, that it doesn't take much to end the relationship with God, when suffering comes along. But strangely enough, from my experience, that is not always the case, and it is just as likely that in the situation of suffering, contact by the non-believer, with someone of deep faith who shows they care, and in a sense is the bringer of God's love into the situation, can be the balm of hurt minds and broken hearts, and indeed the sower of a seed of faith.

Suffering can be a creative situation leading to an opening up of possibilities particularly with the inner person, their hopes and fears and feelings.

The classic treatment of this whole subject is the book of Job. All my life I have been frightened of the book of Job. I have never been able to get my silly head around its central theme, and hearing it in bits in church readings, and in echoes from far away

which never fitted together, it has seemed less than helpful. But I have a theory that God gives us the time and the occasion for things when they are really needed, and this is one of those times. How could a talk on suffering and hope not include a discussion of the significance of the book of Job? The Book of Job is an awesome piece of work, amazingly crafted. It is one of the great literary/religious works of human history, but read it I hadn't. What made the difference for me this time was that I decided to read it in one go. Doing that, I saw it for what it is – a great drama, a religious drama. How important it is to get into the heart of something, so that we feel we are at one with it, and not always struggling behind it. That total immersion was so helpful. It has acts and it has scenes, and you don't have to think it's real, and so get distracted by impossible and unlikely scenarios. Although much of it can compare with family tragedies of any era and any country, and yet again that suggests it is only for those in extreme situations. Not at all, it is for each of us who have a serious desire to know the place that our faith in God has as it meets occasions of spiritual trial. It is presented as extreme so that we can get to the heart of what being faithful to God means. It highlights the matter in hand, and so having done that rearrangement of prejudice over this biblical work, it kept on and on making sense and revealed the results of the author's wisdom.

The writer sets up the drama of Job in such a way that the Lord God and Satan devise a scheme to test the faith of Job. How will Job react? Will his faith break under him? Will he curse God? Three visitors, comforters so called, make three visits each to Job, and in between visits Job recounts how he feels. He gets as low as it's possible to feel, but despite everything he refuses to curse or blame God. He gets as low as he can possibly get in despair "Let me alone" he cries "before I go to hell", yet he refuses to blame God, and continues to accept that God is in charge. In chapter 17 there is the most incredible and powerful assault on his faith, and Job expresses his anguish, which has to be said includes some railing against God: "Why do you" he says to his comforters, "Why do you, like God pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh?" (19.22). And then perhaps the most famous words in the book of Job:

O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock for ever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

19.23-27

The dialogue in the book of Job offers no solution to the mystery of suffering. Neither Job nor his friends could deduce the reason for it, and so the intellectual problem is unsolved. Yet the author would express his faith that there is a reason hidden in the heart of God, as the reason for Job's suffering was, and that it is futile to try and fathom it. The thrust of what is called the first Divine speech (chs. 38,39) is that the margins of human ignorance are so great that we should not presume to judge, and Job is rebuked for his presumption in passing judgement on God. The intellectual agnosticism is but

the basis for a religious message. If there is such a thing as innocent suffering, then suffering is not necessarily the proof that we are abandoned by God, and if the sufferer will have faith in God and be humbly submissive to God, then he may enjoy the fellowship of God even in his suffering” (H.H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament*, p. 142)

We may be cynical about that, in the light of our experience, but as with all matters under the blessing of faith, we are as it were flying in the space that God makes for us to be ourselves, but also to allow ourselves to be supported by the gravity that is God. God has to let our free will take its turn but underneath are the everlasting arms. How do we know? We don't know for sure in the way we know some things for sure. We live in the paradox: faith being our only security.

Job is a drama. It is a literary device to allow us to learn about the deep matters of faith. I was conscious of King Lear when I was reading Job, and that helped me acknowledge its sense of fabrication. A fabrication sounds strange for a work which has such a sense of reality, and literalists might be alarmed at the idea, not able to understand the way that literature works on the soul, and not just on the intellect alone. The Bible is true in many different ways.

The greatest outworking of the book of Job in scripture is the crucifixion of Christ in which the ancient tragic dramas became real. If we find ourselves living our lives under the spell of Jesus Christ, then the 'hope' that is the second part of the title becomes a reality. The links between the Old and New testaments are as rich and various as in any body of worlds literature. The links between the two are living and profound. Job is an emblematic hero of the faith, not a Saviour.

Job knew that his redeemer lived, and as Christ lived in the heart of God from the beginning, as St John described it, so Christ could be Job's redeemer as well as ours. With scripture we must not allow ourselves to be ruled by the concept of linear time, but by the untold riches of eternity. Christ's passion and Job's passion coalesce. Job as a type of Christ underwent his trials, his passion. Raised from the dead, Christ opens the gate of everlasting life for those trapped in unbelief. Christ breathes life into the fiction and makes sense of suffering love, makes it the means to salvation.

Christ adds one more piece to this connection between suffering and hope. If he somehow redeemed the situation for Job, and all those whom Job represents in suffering for the love of God through time, Christ's presence still assists us now, through the Holy Spirit working in the world today. I have only to mention the iconic names of Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Sister Mary Frances in Oxford, and Dame Cecily Saunders in Sydenham pioneering the Hospice movement, to alert us to the witness of hope in suffering. They are well known in the world today not by what they say or write, necessarily, but by what they did and do now, how they live, how they treat people, how they give dignity to the dying, and so open up a new meaning of what it is to be raised. We marvel at how they meet the hard questions, with the opportunities they make for waiting: waiting for the words for just as long as it takes, and to be alongside in the waiting. The Hospice movement may well have restored the opportunities previous generations made to allow death to be more a part of the story than the closing of a book, to provide a dignity that is very close to holiness, and a holding, and a silence, which brings hope into suffering. They see silence as positive, silence as a space we can be with God in. Those skilled in sharing

with the dying know there are no clever answers only a permission just to rest in the unknowing, until the shaken snowstorm of bereavement settles and we know the peace and presence of Christ. Christ who turned suffering into glory gave us all an eternal hope.

Suffering is a sensitive experience, and it is everyone's province. Consequently we are involved in deep and personal matters. The depth of another's suffering can never be fully known, and easy answers, and just plain wrong answers can be unwittingly hurtful. The best situation for dealing with these matters is rarely the pulpit or the lectern, but the quiet and comfortable place, the place of trust and the place of hope. What does hope look like, sound like, feel like? It feels like some really good consultants, some people with a real gift of empathy, some wise people, and some who can help us be ourselves. Laughter and a sense of the ridiculous are not entirely ruled out. Hope is a bit of an abstract word. In flesh and blood terms you know it when you see it.

But I would not want to finish without saying that our closeness to Jesus Christ will not fail us, and he may well help us see our suffering as part of a greater reality beyond this earthly life. Heaven is another country, but we have hints here and now, and we have a picture of the death of Christ not being the end, but in faith the beginning of a new and more glorious reality. We have the gospels to chart that for us, and the love of friends and family and animals to support us, and music, and poetry and love and flowers...all images of greater things to come beyond suffering.

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