

Patient Suffering

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

The reading this morning is found in 1 Peter 4:12 - 19.

Introduction

As a clergyman, one of the most common questions people ask me about God, is this - "why is there so much suffering in the world?" In particular they ask, "and why do bad things happen to good people?" These questions raise the age old problem of suffering. And suffering, in its various forms, is now one of the most commonly cited reasons why people have given up on God, on faith and on the Church.

Given that we are all having to cope with the problems and fallout of coronavirus – and some of us may even have lost loved ones to COVID-19 – looking briefly at the problem of suffering is perhaps, timely.

The problem of suffering is perhaps much more of an issue here in the West than in some other parts of the world, because for many decades now, the western world has enjoyed a relatively affluent and comfortable lifestyle – I'm speaking here in general terms, of course. With a fairly comprehensive social security system, well developed health care systems, advanced technology and democratic, accountable leadership, western nations have managed to eradicate, or at least contain, many of the problems that caused so much misery in the past.

As the general standard of living has improved, a mind-set has developed that tells us we don't deserve to suffer; that suffering is unfair and shouldn't really be happening to us. So when it does happen, it must be someone's fault, and therefore somebody should be putting it right for us. And if it isn't put right - or can't be, and we can't find someone to blame - then it must be God's fault. I've heard this general line of reasoning voiced in different ways, many times over the years.

Now understand that I'm painting with a broad brush here, but nevertheless I believe the picture to be a fairly accurate one. Yes, occasionally you come across a case of astonishing bravery and remarkable resilience and understanding, but the general picture is that the western mind-set now believes it almost has a right to a risk free, pain free, existence. So when suffering intrudes upon that existence, people feel cheated and so someone has to pay; even if that someone is God.

But what does the Bible say? What can we learn from the Scriptures about the problem of suffering. Well the picture I've just described couldn't be further from that we see in the New Testament. There

suffering is acknowledge and understood to be a normal part of our reality. Simply living in this world means you will suffer at some point - be it through sickness or disease; as a result of some natural disaster or at the hands of others. For the New Testament writers such as Peter, their understanding was that one way or another, suffering will come upon you. And when it does St. Peter tells us, we shouldn't react with great surprise, as though something strange were happening to us.

Indeed St Peter goes even further than that, and tells us that some suffering, especially that which comes our way as a consequence of being followers of Jesus - is to be welcomed, as it marks us out for special honour. Verse 14 of our reading says this:

“If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

So instead of blaming God for suffering that comes our way, if as Christians we are persecuted for our faith, then we should actually be praising God. Now I know this is far easier said than done, obviously – it can be very hard at times, especially when we don't understand why certain things are happening to us. But God is always worthy of our praise, whether we are enjoying good times or having to endure difficult, hard times. Indeed, this is one of the great lessons from the book of Job. If we do find ourselves suffering, St. Peter tells us it is far better we suffer for doing what is right, than for doing what is wrong. He says:

“If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler... those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

Any praise that we give to God during difficult times; during our times of trial and hurt - such praise is worth far more to Him than praise offered when times are easy and comfortable. Genuine praise, offered in faith from a loving heart is always acceptable to God of course, but especially so when it has really cost us. The Lord knows and understands that such praise can be very hard to give – but such sacrificial praise won't go unrewarded or forgotten.

We also need to remember, that whilst God has never promised us a life free from suffering or pain, He has promised that in all things He will work for the good of those who love Him - meaning those who obey His teaching and keep His Word. St. Paul puts it this way:

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

Today we live in a world that is constantly looking for someone to blame when things go wrong; a world that is always looking for compensation or for a way to get even. Now I'm not saying criminal negligence shouldn't be punished – of course it should, obviously. But when suffering or difficulties come our way, we can howl and protest; we can stamp our feet, point the finger and blame others.

We can even blame God Himself, but none of these things will likely make our situation better or ease our difficulties, and neither will they please God.

Rather, as followers of Jesus our response to suffering, our attitude to affliction and hardship should be the same as that of Christ Himself...

*“He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth” (Isa 53:7, Acts 8:32).*

This example of patient suffering set by Jesus, is one we need to take to heart. It's not something that will come naturally or easily, nor will it happen overnight when we come to faith. Rather it takes time, and comes as we grow and mature in our faith and as we exercise the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer and bible study. As we do these things and ask the Holy Spirit to fill us and strengthen us, God in His great love, will bring us through the times of trial. Amen.