

I've been thinking about God....

What do you find yourself thinking about during these extraordinary times? Maybe it's about the things you currently cannot do, hug the grand-children, enjoy a good meal out, go to the theatre or the football, or visit friends. If so you are really thinking about what you would like to do when things 'return to normal' and you can pick up the pleasures that enriched your life. I understand that well, and the other side of that will be leaving behind the discomforts and pain that the pandemic has brought into our daily existence – loss, isolation, anxiety, overwork (for some), boredom (for others), hardship, sadness – experiences will vary greatly. Because of all those, my prayer is “Lord bring us through this time quickly” because there is real pain and suffering out there and I long for an ending. But in the next breath I find myself saying “But not too quickly, so that we learn what we need to from these days and deep change becomes possible”. And that is why I have been thinking about God because learning has to begin at home, and we cannot hope for our world to be learning things if we ourselves are hiding in some insulated theological bubble.

Thinking about God could lead us in many directions, but in the first instance it has taken me to that age-old issue of suffering, and what that does to our belief in a good God. It may be an age-old issue, but if this is the greatest global catastrophe the world has faced in my lifetime, then it certainly merits some fresh thinking through in the light of what we are all experiencing. We are familiar with the dilemma. We want and believe God to be all powerful and all loving. However the presence of suffering, especially when it is overwhelming, threatens to drive a chasm between those two ideas. If God is all powerful, and suffering still exists, then maybe he doesn't care and is cruel and tyrannical. If God is all loving, and suffering still exists, then maybe he is weak and ineffectual and although he may be very sympathetic, there is not much help he can bring.

I suspect that many of us live outwardly with some sort of working compromise between the power and love of God without attending to some of the logical inconsistencies that lie below the surface. Underneath however we may veer towards one side or the other which may reveal itself in certain attitudes that emerge when we are under pressure. An all powerful God may encourage us to pray and seek his intervention in our lives, and give us hope in good final outcomes, but may lead us to be controlling, judgemental and even cruel on the way. An all loving God may encourage us to feel understood and accepted for who we are, and tolerant and caring of others, but may lead us to be sentimental bland and human-centred. Holding a creative balance is hard, especially when faced with an overwhelming sense of pain or evil which can make us doubt both God's power and love and even existence.

One of the phrases I have heard used several times by people during this pandemic is “God is in control” which is one of the current ways we express our belief in the power of God. It is certainly frightening to contemplate a world going out of control and it is an important part of maintaining our hope that the outcome of things - whether personal or global - will be good not evil. Moreover it is a belief that is encouraged in the scriptures, that God’s purposes will be fulfilled, his will be done. In the Old Testament especially, his sovereignty is strongly affirmed. The post-exilic faith that emerged in the second part of Isaiah for instance boldly asserts “I am the Lord and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.” (45:5) This was not an easy conclusion formed in comfortable times but forged in the furnace of suffering and the loss of land, kingdom and temple. As such the pain of the times had also to be included in any understanding of sovereignty: “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the Lord do all these things.” (45:7). It is a robust assertion of sovereignty and the ground for a certain sort of assurance provided you felt on the right side of God or to put it the other way round, that He was on your side. Otherwise it might generate awe, respect, and fear but struggle to convey love and a sense of grace especially to one in a place of raw vulnerability. It calls out for something more.

This is how I have found myself reacting when people in our current situation have simply said “God is in control.” A voice inside me protests “That will not do!” or at least “That is not enough. It calls out for something more.” If God is in control, what is that saying to the family mourning a loved one from whom they were isolated in their final moments and who cannot gather to mourn and say farewell, or to the parent wracked with anxiety as to how they will provide for their family as their job disappears in the chaos of recession or to the refugees already far from home in a camp where adequate medical facilities are absent and social distancing an impossible dream? If God is in control then surely he cannot care, he cannot mind the pain that we are in.

The problem is that I don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I don’t want to abandon all sense that God is powerful, that He will triumph over evil, that his purposes will be fulfilled. It’s just that if you tie his power to this idea of being in control, it leads into all the difficulties we’ve discovered. Somehow we have to redeem power from just being about control, being strong and mighty, getting your way. The something more we need is revealed by Jesus. Here we see less God in control, but more God vulnerable, God putting himself in human hands, God loving sacrificially. What Jesus shows us is that God’s power is love, love and more love. Evil is overcome not by some superior power of compulsion or control, but by persistent sacrificial loving goodness.

This can begin to explain the sort of world we are in. It is a world which contains the space for love, a space which inevitably entails God letting go of some of the control He might exert on his world. The risk is that the space will sometimes get filled by human selfishness and cruelty and any number of things that might make us doubt the wisdom of humankind being given that sort of freedom. It is a space that can be filled with a pandemic that exposes human weaknesses, economic inequalities and injustices, inattention to the key issues etc. But it is also a space for love and we have seen that during these times in the astonishing commitment and care of doctors and nurses, the generosity and practical compassion in neighbourhoods, the quickening of the spirit in times of worship and prayer. The question is do we believe in the power of love as much as God appears to do such that it more than vindicates the risks entailed in letting go of the power of control and still enables his ultimate purpose to be realised?

Of course it depends on how we define love and we will need to lose some of the more sentimental versions on the way. God's love is a tough, sacrificial love that is most fully revealed by Christ and him crucified. It is Calvary love, 'agape' to use the NT Greek word, that has this astonishing power. This is power that even in a ghastly pandemic can arrest a hurting, selfish world and let justice, compassion and hope emerge. It is also to place God's purpose on a larger canvas than this life alone. It cannot be a death-avoiding love. Whether I really believe in the power of love will be tested by how I transcend my fears and anxieties and self protectiveness to live out a faith in its power to transform me, my relationships and the world around. It will be to embrace with the apostle Paul the belief that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." Not many of us find foolishness and weakness easy. Command and control have a real attraction. But the purposes of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are realised by a different power, and now gives us a real opportunity to trust Him in it and then live it out ourselves.

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Questions

Is the idea "God is in control" reassuring or inadequate in a time like this pandemic?

Do we believe in the power of love as much as God appears to do and how might this show at this time?