

Human Suffering, Divine Difference

Lent Sermons 2013

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Human Suffering, Divine Indifference

Robinson College, Cambridge, 20th January 2013

(Dr Simon Perry)

Like several others here, I used to be in the Scouts – and in the scout movement there is a clear and straightforward hierarchy. There is a basic, standard-issue scout with a beret, a neckerchief and a woggle – then there are assistant patrol leaders, then there are patrol leaders, then the adult scout leaders, then the scout master, and then – way up at the top of the tree – is the Group Scout Leader. And our Group Scout Leader was an absolutely terrifying figure. Everyone was terrified of him, and when I say everyone, I include the other scout leaders and the scout master. His presence would change the atmosphere, evoke fear from everyone present, and frighten evil spirits back into the abyss.

And yet, when we used to go on Scout camp – when it was cold and wet and miserable, and the food was horrible and I was missing my mum – I didn't go and seek comfort from the assistant patrol leader, or the patrol leader, or the scout leaders or the scout master. I went straight to this terrifying figure way up there at the top of the tree: the Group Scout Leader. And I suppose the obvious question is why. Well, the answer is really simple. The Group Scout leader was my dad. Yes, he was terrifying, but to me he was completely approachable.

This term we are looking at the character of the Christian god, and the contradictory dimensions we traditionally ascribe to this god. On the one hand – he is the loving, caring, God-with us, character – on the other hand, he is the judge, the celestial thought police, the hanging judge who condemns the majority of his creatures to a life-time of stress, and for most humans, an eternity of torment. Can an individual deity possibly be both all-powerful and omnipotent, and yet perfect in love? Epicurus, the philosopher posed this very question three centuries before Christ:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

By the time this sentiment has squeezed itself through the pen of Richard Dawkins, it loses more than a touch of its subtlety.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Well, these are the aspects of the divine character that we will be exploring throughout the rest of Lent term, the focus being upon why an all-powerful God can tolerate and even demand human suffering. After all, human suffering is everywhere! We live in a violent universe – a universe not only in which we sometimes encounter violence, but a universe in which life can only flourish because we are in the middle of a massively violent explosion of cosmic proportions. Violence is what we see, whether we marvel at the beauty of the milky way, or at the intricacy of the spider's web.

How then, could a loving god justify creating a world in which violence is the norm? Why did he not create a world of bliss only, something closer to the kind of afterlife imagined by so many Christians? Why would he want his children to grow up in a world of such horror?

I suppose the beginning of an answer is found by pursuing a question about an alternative. Is it possible that a deity could create a serene, luxurious, couch-potato existence, devoid of all suffering, pain and death and yet an existence that would still be precious, worthwhile and have supreme value? Should god have invented a non-violent universe? This, after all, is what an omnipotent god can do: he can create ecosystems in which different species are not interdependent, where the life of one does not depend upon the death of another. Of course to create an eco system without violence is like creating a four-sided triangle, or creating a rock so big even he couldn't move it. But ... the god of Scripture is not, and is absolutely not, an Omnipotent God! Omnipotence comes from Greek philosophy, not Christian or Jewish Scriptures. The God of Scripture is powerful, who creates a universe, answers prayers, and – it seems – acts in ways that do not fit with Newtonian laws of nature. But you don't have to be omnipotent to be an almighty god.

Life, however short and apparently meaningless, however painful it might be, is still immeasurably valued by those that have it. Why does a mammal run from a predator? When caught, why does it fight until its dying breath? Life itself is a mind-bogglingly limited resource but if it were not, would it still be precious? Life on earth is life in the midst of a violent explosion – but this is the only conceivable context in which god-given life can flourish. Whilst such an observation does not necessarily bring a final answer, it does show that a god who created a violent universe is not necessarily a malevolent, sadistic tyrant of cosmic proportions.

In the reading we had from Romans, saint Paul accepts full-on, the view that the entire created order is in a state of disintegration and decay. This is no gloomy, pessimistic, view of the universe. The reality is that the world is full of horrible and painful stuff happening all the time. What Paul argues for is – given that this is how the world works, what does it mean to worship a loving God in such a context?

The upbeat, happy-clappy, god-loves me so aren't I bless, mentality – finds little place in Scripture. The view that 'life-is-great so long as you remain tediously and terminally pious' is view that many Christians manage to cling to for a long time. The reading from the psalms seems to back up such a view. "I was young and now I am old, and I have never seen the righteous forsaken!" Well, it's worth remembering that it was a member of the Israeli Royal family who wrote those words... and when you bear that in mind it sounds suspiciously like that phrase attributed to Mary Antoinette: "Let them eat cake." Or, "Let them eat brioche" if we translate it properly. In the context of the psalm, it reads like a piece of well-crafted government propaganda designed to exhort the people to pray in times of trouble, rather like Archbishop William Temple calling the nation to prayer during the second world war.

However we interpret this psalm of David, Paul is under no illusion that we live in a violent, unfair, stressful universe – a creation condemned to frustration – but a creation that is itself on tiptoe waiting for something to happen! What is that something?

For Paul, it lies in the resurrection of Christ. In the history of the universe, in the history of nature, and the history of human nature – violent power asserts itself dispassionately, coldly, inevitably. This was no less true in the history of politics: the great superpower of Rome, like all others, had a strict hierarchy: the privileged towards the centre, the powerless towards the margins – and out there, on the unmetaphysical outside of our world are the disposable humans to whom we remain hostile, indifferent, or ignorant. Those at the centre exert power, those beyond the household, suffer. That is the nature of the world we live in.

And the point of resurrection for Paul, is that the power exerted by the son of God, was not a coercive, violent, mechanical, power. If anything, we see Christ throw off all temptation to exert power – we see him become powerless, to the point of being crucified by those who did have power. The crucifixion of Jesus, shows that powerlessness gets you nowhere.

And yet the resurrection is a vindication of the powerlessness of Christ. A vindication of the self-giving love that characterised the son of God. There is nothing omnipotent about this Christ. And if this Christ reveals the character of God, then this is a God who suffers, whose means are accomplished not by flexing muscle but by inviting his followers to adopt a certain way of being, a way of life in harmony with all that the world is created to be. The whole creation, says Paul, is on tip toe, waiting for the sons of God to be revealed. Waiting for sons of God, to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that they live and act the way that Christ lived and acted.

There is little in scripture in the way of armchair social commentary about how God chooses to act. There is a lot which acknowledges the violent nature of our world and how God equips and invites us to live in such a world. There is a lot about how God gives himself to such a world, and how God himself acts within such a world. Not with omnipotence, but with a different brand of power which – on the surface of it looks harmless, toothless and pointless, but which – in reality, can change the way that the world works.

And yet, when we look at the world and we look at Scripture in its fullness – then it looks as though the way God acts in the world is in accordance with the caricatures offered by Dawkins and his followers. A blood-thirsty, merciless control-freak...

A capriciously malevolent bully? These are the pictures of God that we will examine throughout the rest of the term – and to see if living in a violent world means worshipping a violent God.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

27 JANUARY 2013

Dr. Mary Stewart

On the 68th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau

We know all about the Holocaust, don't we? Last year Auschwitz had nearly 1.5 million visitors, ten times more than a decade ago - it has become, to quote a recent German film, a place 'for tourists to come'. But the more we really learn, the more we may find, like the philosopher Theodor Adorno, that language itself fails us in the face of such horror. In any case the victims' stories are not really ours to tell: watch BBC1 at 10.25 tonight [1] if you want to hear the almost unbearable truth directly from a survivor. But silence isn't really an option either, given the existence of Holocaust deniers like David Irving, so if we want to do more than, as one writer put it, 'leave the Holocaust hanging like a picture on the wall', we have to seek some approach, so - with great trepidation and no promise of metaphysical insights - I am starting as concretely as possible, with a question: what has all this really to do with us? and with a building, the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

You will find there are actually two buildings side by side, one in harmonious neo-classical style dating from the 1730s and which once housed the Royal Judiciary of Brandenburg, the other lacking all harmony, shaped like a broken star and unmistakably conceived by the architect Daniel Libeskind. What greater disjunction could there be between the two ages these adjacent buildings represent? The age of Enlightenment with its rationalist order, set against an era of profound dislocation: together they clearly offer a symbolic representation of the terrible rupture in European culture wrought by the Holocaust. Yet the buildings are not in fact separate: you enter the museum through the neo-classical building, and pass - underground - into the new section, where three corridors face you. At the end of the first one you open a heavy door that slams behind you, leaving you in an immensely high, silent, cold chamber lit only by a tiny slit at the top. This is the path of the Holocaust into imprisonment, death and obliteration. When you emerge to pursue the second corridor, you are led out-of-doors into a garden full of crazily tilting columns and undulating paving, making you feel queasy and seasick as you try to walk about: this is the path of uprooting and exile. Then finally the third, wider corridor leads you into the museum proper, which documents the Jewish life in Berlin over the centuries: this is the path of survival, though still not an easy one as the building again makes you aware, with its unexpected changes of direction and jagged windows. These are then the three infinitely painful paths that faced 20c. European Jews. Some find the symbolism simplistically overt, even absurd in seeming to suggest visitors can share in the experience of those caught up in the Holocaust. But I think that is to view it wrongly. These brief imaginative immersions vividly remind us of what victims faced, but each also forces us onwards - physically in space, and mentally too - into the main museum and into understanding not only the story of persecution, inescapable though that is, but also just what was at stake in the collective 'Holocaust'. The most shocking thing we encounter is in fact the story of how fully integrated many Jews were. Many great names of German, indeed European culture are documented there - the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn, Albert Einstein - but there are also middle-class interiors from Jewish homes, showing alongside precious books or sacred objects something as touching and surprising as a Christmas tree. Jews were part of normal German life and culture, if not of all its institutions: the Holocaust was directed not against strangers, but against neighbours, against the very heart of the country's intellectual life. This is why the symbolism of the two disparate yet ultimately linked buildings is so important and potent: the apparent caesura in modern European history - between rationalism and alien savagery - was not a caesura at all but a home product, a culture turning on the best in itself.

How do we make any sense of this? Historians argue endlessly, but one challenging view is that of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, of which Simon reminded me. In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) Bauman argues that the Holocaust was not just an unforeseeable Hobbesian eruption of pre-modern barbarity, but rather a problem and product of our modern civilisation itself. Where Freud suggests it is the constraints of society that keep psychopathic tendencies in check, Bauman argues it was precisely the structures of modern civilisation that made the Holocaust ultimately realizable. The Final Solution can be seen as an extreme outcome of bureaucratic culture,

the product of procedural rationality and taxonomic categorisation aimed at control of perceived 'alien' elements, whether Jews, Roma or gays. It is not of course that modern bureaucracy must lead to a Holocaust, that would be absurd, but viewing society primarily as an object of administration, as something to be 'mastered', is a significant enabling factor, Bauman argues. In fact Hitler's desire to make Germany 'judenfrei' (free of Jews) had direct precedents in Nationalist circles a century or more earlier[2]; Hitler's hatred was certainly more extreme still, and spoke to a ready sense of grievance after the débâcle of the Versailles Treaty, but a key difference also lies in how his modern state could be organised. With perverse efficiency Hitler's men developed new processes to meet new 'demand', as more and more territories were rapidly conquered: what started with social exclusion of Jews and 'encouraged' emigration, then led on to painstakingly organized deportation (with each train journey to the ghettos or camps carefully docketed and paid for) and so on incrementally to the terrible ending we are commemorating today. (With bitter irony, the very same bureaucratic efficiency was also successfully deployed on the prohibition of foxhunting with hounds - as too cruel.)

I find this argument on modernity persuasive, because it starts to shed light on that profound puzzle of how, in a cultured nation - alongside the undoubted psychopaths - ordinary, basically moral individuals, like us, could become involved in such immoral ends: through acceptance of a bureaucratic system which step by step authorized destruction for 'national security'. The civilizing process may have made us dislike and shun violence, Bauman suggests, (and the psychologist Steven Pinker even posits an evolutionary diminution of violence in his most recent book, *The Better Angels of our Natures: A History of Violence and Humanity*, 2012), but - for Bauman - through that very civilizing process we have also invented the means to make our aversion to violence irrelevant when certain acts seem required in the name of civilized values like 'order'. Interestingly, this has been confirmed by recent work on the rediscovered transcripts of bugged PoW conversations both in Britain and the USA[3]: military personnel ensured that their focus was always limited to their own special competence (e.g. registration of Jewish prisoners, punctual arrival of death squads), thus remaining able to ignore the moral consequences of their work. And we can all be susceptible, not just soldiers or bureaucrats: the German historian Götz Aly[4] has shown that even early on the Nazis' pro-working-class social agenda effectively bred suspicion of intellectuals and thus rendered the largely Jewish cultured middle-class vulnerable. You can get a good sense of just how effective this was if you read Hans Fallada's reissued 1940s novel *Alone in Berlin*. [5]

But what has all this to do with us, now? Surely we are not in such moral danger? If we follow Steven Pinker, extreme genocidal events (like Bosnia) will only occur in shallow-rooted democracies, but both Bauman and Aly more worryingly imply that all systematically administered modern societies tend to produce an unreflective myopic conformism. Our very efficiency in mastering our own complex modern lives is also what inures us to the potential outcome of our highly developed systems, and cruelty takes many forms. Just how vital that insight remains for us all was made clear by the new President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, a former East German pastor who knows a thing or two about state-generated suffering and put it thus in a speech about Europe and the Holocaust: 'Humanitarian values do not reside in a safe haven. They disintegrate or suffer damage wherever reason and morality stand in opposition to each other. Our civilisation is not a final stage of history, but a temporarily secured form of existence.' [6]

Maybe, then, we should reverse the heading for this term's sermons: it is human indifference that has so often helped to produce profound suffering in the modern world. Where God is in all this I leave to the theologians, but if I ventured a speculation I would refer to Franz Kafka's wonderful little tale *Auf der Galerie* ("Up in the gallery/In the gods"): redemption, whatever it might mean, would be possible only if we could be ruthlessly honest about the pain we create. No wonder Daniel Libeskind sited his tortured building next to an embodiment of state organisation: may none of us forget the dark potential of that connection, made so very real in the tattooed arms and countless, haunting faces of the Holocaust.

[1] "Prisoner A26188: Henia Bryer"

[2] e.g. Hartwig von Hundt-Radowsky, Ernst Moritz Arndt, Friedrich Rühs

[3] Sönke Neitzel & Harald Weitzer Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying, 2012; Felix Römer, Kameraden – Die Wehrmacht von innen, 2012

[4] Götz Aly, Warum die Deutschen? Warum die Juden? 2011

[5] Hans Fallada, Jeder stirbt für sich allein, 1947; translated by Michael Hofmann as Alone in Berlin, 2009

[6] Welche Erinnerungen braucht Europa? Speech given on 28.3.2006 at the Robert Bosch Stiftung, Stuttgart

The Crusades,

3rd Feb 2013

Dr Simon Perry

When I was in the military a few years ago, I and two other friends had been given permission to pop into the local town to get some cash – and while we were there, we went into Macdonalds for a banana milkshake.

Unfortunately, when we entered Macdonalds, a gang of troublesome thugs also entered – and one very large troublesome thug flew into a rage and started to attack people. At the time, I was so confident in my own super-powers, I decided to engage the hostile. Selflessly abandoning my banana milkshake, I waded into the carnage in order to establish justice and apply the rule of minimum force.

The word 'success' could not be less applicable to what happened next. Within sixty seconds, I was running through the streets of Hereford, with a broken nose, being chased by approximately one hundred stone of angry troublesome thugs.

Several months later, the incident was being heard in Hereford Crown Court, where the chief thug had accused me of Grievous Bodily Harm, largely on account of his nose having changed shape and his teeth being fewer in number. Thankfully the judge was having none of it... awarded me a large sum of cash, and commended me for acting in the public interest. The judge then turned to me, peered over his glasses and declared, "Next time you act in the public interest Mr Perry, you may like to consider doing it more gently."

This evening, we look at questions raised by the medieval adventures of thugorous chivalry, we call the Crusades. By crusades, we tend to mean western adventures into Muslim-controlled territory in order to buttress our own worldview and lifestyle by committing a host of atrocities. In the modern world, of course, we have developed new means of justifying precisely this kind of adventure. In the medieval world, it was necessary to embark upon such adventures with the approval of the Christian god.

For, the first crusade which took place at the end of the eleventh century, that was a fairly straightforward affair... Tales of atrocities inflicted upon fellow Christians by those nasty pagan Turks, filtered into Western Europe. The emperor of the Christian East appealed to the west for military aid, and Pope Urban II called for a crusade. Despite the fact that the first crusade was marked by incompetence, ignorance, and thuggery – these qualities are hardly absent from twenty first century adventures into Muslim territory.

In fact, many of those who embarked upon that first crusade were honest, well-meaning, self-sacrificing men (ready to leave their families and their homes and their banana milkshakes) and embark upon a quest to free the oppressed, and to bring liberation to those beset by undefeatable hostile forces of Islam. Sure, the later crusades descended into pointless but profitable excursions into foreign territory, where a fading warrior class got to attack those who were easy to cast as 'baddies' because they were Muslims. But the crusades began as a response to a genuine call from people who were under serious threat from a powerful and expansive enemy. Those who marched out to defend them, sincerely believed they were acting in the public interest, but might they have done it more gently?

There was certainly no Christian tradition of a 'Holy War'. And it takes little biblical knowledge to see that Jesus of Nazareth would never have endorsed such an enterprise! Or would he? The New Testament reading we had drew from an incident at the very end of Jesus' ministry – recounts the final evening of Jesus before he is arrested. Jesus has instituted the Lord's Supper, warned Peter of his denial, and given them a speech implying that their own mission will cost them everything and bring them into conflict. And at the end of it, the disciples produce two swords, and Jesus said, "that is enough!" As though Jesus were about to launch an assault upon the Roman guard. But this, of course, would not be consistent with the entire sweep of Jesus' ministry.

Here we have to address the question of how God achieves his purposes. Does God need to use armies in order to see his will done? The Old Testament – depending on how it is read, can imply that he does. The citation from the great Warrior King David, could be read either as the belief that God uses armies for his own purposes – or that his power implies alternative means of seeing his own will done.

It is from these kinds of passages that many Christians have bought into the belief that God is Omnipotent. If humans have power to achieve their own ends – then multiply that power by infinity – and God has absolute, unrivalled, unlimited power. Of course, by doing that – we are simply projecting our own beliefs about how to get things done – up onto God. In other words, omnipotence – as human power multiplied into infinity – is simply idolatrous. On the other hand, Scripture presents the portrait of a God whose purposes are achieved not by coercive power, but by entirely other means.

In Zechariah: Not by power, nor by might, but by my spirit, saith the Lord.

When Israel sought an alliance with Egypt, they were told not to trust Egyptian horses and chariots, as though God's ends were achieved by military technology.

The whole notion of the Kingdom of God – the realm in which the authority of God is rightly exercised and justice is done – is not a kingdom of the sword.

Ultimately, the point of the resurrection is that human power cannot defeat the power of God, whose purposes are achieved not by military action or human might, but by radical self-giving love. That is the sense in which the portrait of God that emerges from Scripture is Almighty – not because he equips his people for acts of violence against other armies – no matter how justly or gently those armies act – but because the power of an army is unable (ultimately) to defeat the purposes of a loving God.

So when, at the end of Jesus' ministry those who had been closest to Jesus all the way through, declare – Look – we've got two swords, Jesus simply rolls his eyes in despair and says, "Oh that's enough."

Omnipotence, as it is traditionally understood, is simply a means of baptizing one's human ambitions with divine purposes – enabling you to claim that you will win because God is on your side. We sang the Agincourt Carol earlier on, and - as any historian knows, the English Army at Agincourt was led by Sir Kenneth Brannagh, who at the end of the battle conclude, "God fought for us". That, according to those who believe in omnipotence, is how God acts in the public interest!

The crusades then, are widely seen as an example of how religion is dangerous: Christians armed with the belief that God is on their side march off into the world convinced that they are right, the enemy is wrong, and look at the

disaster that ensues! Thankfully, now that we live in a secular age, we have evolved ethically and outgrown our morally retarded ancestors.

Last week, Dr Stewart quoted a recent book by the philosopher Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, in which he argues that humanity is becoming more intelligent, more rational and therefore less violent.

Violence, like that of the crusades, comes from dated religions who believe they have divine backing for their violent human enterprises. The trouble is ... the violent enterprises continue in the world today. But we no longer appeal to a god who no one believes in, in order to justify that violence. We justify it in other ways. We need not even look simply at the way that modern wars have been justified by the west.

For instance, the IMF's dictates for Madagascar – which resulted in loss of funding for a crucial project Mosquito eradication programme, and in turn – in the deaths of 10-15000 people, at least 5000 of them children. The children who died in Madagascar do not feature in Pinker's statistics, because violence was inflicted by Mosquitos instead bombs. Since there is no easy, direct, identifiable link between those who suffer and those who benefit, then – by Pinker's reckoning – no violence has been committed.

If I, the perpetrator, am protected by the complex systems of modern economics and technology, from the victim who suffers as a result of my actions, I can wash my hands and presume no violence is done. If I choose to buy low-priced chocolate or climb on an aeroplane for an unnecessary journey, never will I be regarded as committing violent acts – even though such actions might have consequences that inflict suffering upon others.

With smug superiority I can tut tut at the crusades. Crusades are easy to condemn, because they are easy to stick a label on.

The action of an Almighty God, however, is of a different nature – The way that this God is made present upon earth is not through successful armies, or powerful tyrants, but through the body of Christ: a community of people who commit to follow a condemned, humiliated political prisoner, who was ultimately tortured and executed. Faith is the readiness to follow this Jesus through failure and despair, in the belief that your actions will ultimately be vindicated in the way that Christ's were.

South African Street Children: A Narrative Sermon

Miss Helena Mayles, Ordinand, Westcott House

10th February 2013

'Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.'

I met Judy Westwater at a local school where she was giving a presentation about her charity, The Pegasus Children's Trust, and the work that they do with the forgotten street children of South Africa. Having been a street child herself she has a real sacrificial devotion to these children. When she looks at them she sees a child of great worth, a significant individual, a beautiful child of God. Although The Pegasus Children's Trust is not an explicitly Christian charity; negative experiences of Church at a young age have turned Judy away from Christianity, her beliefs lie in a profound sense of the importance of the other. God she says is not a transcendent, distant God, God she says, is in here, God, she says, is in each one of those children.

Mother Teresa once said,

'When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed. We have refused to be instruments of love in the hands of God to give the poor a piece of bread, to offer them a dress with which to ward off the cold. It has happened because we did not recognize Christ when, once more, he appeared under the guise of pain, identified with a man numb from the cold, dying of hunger, when he came in a lonely human being, in a lost child in search of a home.

Where do you see Christ?

He was only a child.

He was a typical boy of his age he used to play football with his brothers and sisters... and anyone else who wanted to join in. They would tear down the streets laughing and shouting, trying to dodge the mothers carrying the shopping and the old men as they sat smoking cigars.

They were happy. In his family they didn't have much but they did have each other. Maybe you would say that they were poor, but as long as they had each other the world never seemed that bad.

Until one day, one day, his parents weren't there anymore. He had gone to school that morning and when he came back they weren't there. His grandparents were sitting in the corner of the room with a look that made him feel uneasy, that made him want to cry.

'There's been an accident'

The words hit him like the truck that had hit his parents. His legs gave way, he found himself falling to the floor, he felt his whole world falling around him. Not a limb moved or even a tear fell from his eye. If you could have seen him you would have sworn that he actually stopped breathing for a short while, it was as if his whole body was numb.

Since that day his grandparents tried their best, selling oranges and pineapples on the side of the road, but he had a lot of brothers and sisters and he saw that his grandparents, try as they could, were struggling to feed all the hungry mouths and that's when he knew he must go.

He loved his family very much but he couldn't be a burden any longer and maybe if he could find a job he could send some money back.

That day he did not play, he didn't even smile; he went to bed with a heavy heart.

In the middle of the night he stuffed some clothes and a loaf of bread in a plastic bag and crept out of the house and ran. Ran away. Ran away from the family he loved, away from the warmth of a home, away from the fun and laughter with his friends. He ran.

'Look I'm here; I'm right in your face, why can you not see me?'

Sometimes he wanted to scream at the faces that walked straight past him, with not even a glance in his direction, as if he wasn't even there. Was he there? Perhaps he wasn't there at all; perhaps he had become so small and insignificant that he was like dust, dust that is so fine that people don't even notice it's there. Was he just a speck of dust?

He had been living on the streets for a while now, he hadn't been able to find a job – no one was interested in a child working for them. He couldn't remember the last time that he didn't feel hungry; he found what he could in the bins, maybe potato peelings for lunch and some chicken bones to chew for dinner.

He dreamed of home, running in the streets with his brothers and sisters and then coming home to the smell of rice and beans and a loving smile from his mother. He dreamed of going to school with all the other kids, dressed in smart uniform, playing in the playground... he used to love maths...

'Oi you, move on you can't stop here this is public property' – he had been noticed...

It took all the energy he had in him to struggle up on to his feet and as soon as he was standing he felt a strange gushing sensation through his ears and heard a ringing that seemed to be getting louder and louder until he could bear it no longer, he covered his ears to take away the ringing, to make it stop, he felt like his head was about to explode and then... nothing.

No one seemed to know how long he was unconscious for, how long he was lying in the shop window for.

But when he did open his eyes he wasn't in pain any longer, the ringing had stopped and, and he wasn't cold any longer. Had he died? Had he died and gone to heaven?

'we were wondering when you would wake up, some of us were getting a little worried, but I knew you'd pull through, you have the fighter spirit in you. What's your name kiddo?

'Sharka'

'Well Sharka, welcome to Twilight, you are welcome to make your home with us here. There are plenty of girls and boys here to make friends with; they will be thrilled to hear you've woken up. My name is Mama Judy and if there is anything at all you need you just ask me. Now that you're awake though I'm sure you are hungry, would you like some food? Beans and rice?

Sharka quickly settled in and made plenty of friends at Twilight, he even taught them all how to play football. He loved going to school too, he studied very hard, he was still determined to do well so that he could get a good job and look after his brothers and sisters. Mama Judy had said that she would help him find his family.

That day he was running back home, he had come top in his class for this week's maths test and had been given a gold star. He couldn't wait to show Mama Judy she will be so proud. He was so excited that he didn't notice the big group of men in front and ran straight into them.

'Watch where you're going kiddo, where are you off to in such a hurry?'

Sharka looked into the eyes peering down at him, these weren't the comforting eyes of Mama Judy, these were cold, full of anger and hatred.

Sharka froze.

'Cat got your tongue?'

As he was saying this one of the other men came forward and seemed to whisper something to those cold eyes. A broad smirk spread across his face.

'Looks like you just been to school? How much do they pay in school then? 50? 100 rand?'

Sharka managed a slight shake of his head.

'20 rand? Surely more than that?'

Another shake.

'Nothing? They make you do all that work and they pay you nothing? That's disgraceful. How do you fancy being paid for your hard work? You do work for us and we'd pay you handsomely and you get to choose what work you want to do. We'll even give you a bed and lots of delicious food, you can join our family, what do you say?'

Sharka, still stunned, thought about his family, his brothers and sisters without enough food on the table. He thought of his plan to send money home... Maybe...

But then he looked down at his gold star, he remembered Mama Judy and his new friends... the school that he went to.... the games he played.... The football and the running... the...

Ow what was that? A jolt to the head woke him from his thoughts...

When he looked up this time he saw that the smirk had gone those cold eyes were about to pop out of the face disfigured in anger and a gun was fixed to his head.

'I've had enough of this time wasting, you're coming with us.'

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Sharka's voice came back and he shouted 'I'm in Mama Judy's gang now' and as he did he spun round and darted off. He was fast; he had been running his whole life....

Bang

He was fast, but bullets were faster.

He was only a child.

'for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me'

Is the God of Scripture a Homophobic Bully?

Dr Simon Perry

17th February, 2013

Richard Dawkins claims that the God of Scripture is a homophobic bully – and this evening we address the question of whether this is a fair description – given the pretty clear reading we heard from Romans. Several people regard this question as potentially, ‘controversial.’ Maybe it is, but it is 23 years to the day since the first chaplain of this college – Rev Dr David Stacey – stood here and preached a sermon entitled ‘Good, Gay and Godly’. Now, 23 years ago, that was a much more controversial topic than it is today – and that sermon (which will be published on the chapel website) is well worth a read, not least because I have leaned quite heavily upon it.

It is an abomination: it is expressly forbidden, it is a moral taboo, it is unnatural, it makes God angry and it is just plain wrong. I am, of course, referring to the practice of wearing two different kinds of cloth at the same time. So anyone wearing a gown with clothes underneath it, anyone wearing jeans and t shirt or shirt and tie, is committing an abominable act – according to the book of Leviticus, which is the only place in the whole of Scripture that condemns homosexuality. It is not only the only thing the bible has to say about homosexuality, but it is the only place where it is expressly and unambiguously forbidden. Any who wish to regard homosexuality as a sin, can only do so by obeying the entire list of dictates of Leviticus – dictates that are impossible and ridiculous to obey in our culture. It would be quite hypocritical to condemn homosexual relationships as sinful, if you yourself are malingering in the depravity of a bi-textile lifestyle.

If you read Leviticus, homosexual acts are an abomination – but if you keep reading and get as far as the book of Proverbs tells us that there are seven abominations, and homosexuality is not one of them. So if you want to be a literalist... you cannot say that homosexuality is an abomination!

But the text of Leviticus is not the focus today. Paul’s letter to the Romans is the most widely cited by those who wish to condemn homosexuality. The trouble is, you can only use Paul’s letter this way, by interpreting it into its exact opposite.

The reading from Amos shows a rhetorical device often used by rabbis. If we want to talk about human nature, then the most natural thing in the world – then it is to love your neighbours and hate your enemies, affection for those within the tribe, hostility for the opposing tribe, support Cambridge boat club – despise Oxford. Us and them, God is on our side, they are the pagans. So Amos – embarks upon an extended diatribe against the neighbours of Israel, the terrible things they have done, the ways they have angered God, and predicted the punishments they will receive. And you can picture the crowds listening to Amos, nodding their heads and clapping their hands with approval at the denunciation of their enemies. The trouble is, having worked his way clockwise around the tribes on Israel’s borders – Amos finally turns his guns upon Israel herself – saying – you, of all the people, you who claim to be God’s chosen people are thereby more guilty than anyone else!

Now this – is precisely the dynamic of Paul’s opening chapter in Romans: in good, Jewish prophetic style, he lists all the detestable practices of the Romans (this letter is, after all, addressed to Rome!) So, the good and godly Christians living in Rome can nod and clap and enjoy the condemnation of their enemies. The trouble is, at the end of this list of detestable practices, Paul turns round to the Christians in Rome to make his real point: “you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another – because by doing that you condemn yourself.” How is that applicable to the question of same sex relationships?

To answer that we have to go back to the creation of the world... six thousand years ago: The only real biblical text that is applicable to the debate about homosexuality, is the text of Genesis, about how Adam and Eve are presented as the archetypal human couple – and that doesn't mention same sex relationships at all. In the beginning, so the logic goes, God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. As David Stacey mentioned in his sermon, "God made Adam and Eve as male and female, put them on earth and told them to get on with it."

The dynamic of the Genesis text shows that the partnership between the man and the woman is a particular way of engaging with otherness. The gender difference between Adam and Eve draws them to encounter the otherness of the other, in a way that two people of the same gender, could not – by definition – encounter it. This is the reason why many people oppose gay marriage – not necessarily because of homophobia. But because the type of gendered otherness that constitutes a marriage – is simply not available to partners of the same gender. So ... however you want to cut it, those arguing for gay marriage – are arguing for marriage to be something other than it currently is anyway. The row over gay marriage is an argument for a redefinition of marriage - and that may or may not be a legitimate argument.

So, the biblical objection to homosexual partnership concerns the limited range of otherness to which those of the same gender have access. Now ... bearing that in mind ... we can come back to Saint Paul. Paul has listed all these terrible sins that his readers just love to condemn, the sins of those others out there, those despicable people not like us, those pagan others at whom we can point the finger. And – in the very act of pointing the finger – we demonstrate our own refusal to engage well with otherness. By condemning others for their limited capacity to engage otherness, we demonstrate our own limited capacity to do the same thing. In other words, by Paul's logic – when we condemn homosexual people, we thereby become spiritually homosexual. In some Christian circles, your readiness to condemn homosexuality is a measure of your Christian soundness and boldness – and it is those circles that, by Pauline logic – are spiritually homosexual.

Those who misread Scripture – whether they are conservative Christians or Richard Dawkins – do not have a monopoly on biblical interpretation.

Is the God of Scripture the homophobic bully he is accused of? If you read Romans in context, the charge doesn't work. The Leviticus text is clearly not a straightforward one to deal with ... The Genesis text is where we are left with, presents the one man and his one wife in the garden of Eden, as the most natural thing in the world. But what counts as natural is itself a complex question – which necessarily incorporates environmental factors, and since nowadays, we all live outside the garden of Eden – it is pretty difficult to use those living in paradise as a model for how real life functions. If you look in the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels under the great ideal of heterosexual bliss called 'marriage', you find only two words: see – divorce. Jesus says virtually nothing on the topic... Adam is no longer in Eden.

But there is another Adam, the last Adam, whose presence we do encounter in the real world. Whose otherness we encounter in one another as we share the meal we call communion. This is an experience you cannot have on someone else's behalf: the God of scripture draws us away from condemning other people – that is the job of satan. The God of scripture is less concerned with how other people engage with otherness: but how do you engage with the otherness we encounter in daily life, in your life, here and now.

Christ's Suffering – Divine Punishment?

Professor Morna Hooker

Is God a sado-masochist? This provocative question comes, as one might expect, from Richard Dawkins, who loves parodying Christian doctrines, in order to demonstrate their absurdity. In his book *The God Delusion*, he condemns the theology that suggests that God insisted on punishing sin, and so put his own son Jesus to death instead of those who had offended him. For once I find myself in agreement with Dawkins. It is, to say the least, difficult to understand how a just God could act in such a way, punishing the innocent in order to forgive the guilty.

And yet many Christians do apparently believe something like this, seeing God as demanding punishment for sins, and transferring them to Jesus, in some kind of travesty of divine justice. Justice? Is this the act of a righteous and loving God? What has gone wrong?

But let us begin at the beginning – and that means, with the suffering and death of Jesus. When anyone dies prematurely, whether through accident, illness, or malice, our first question tends to be 'Why?' A child is run over – Why? A woman dies of a brain tumour – Why? A man is murdered in the street. Why? You can answer all those questions at what we may perhaps call the factual level. The child died because she ran out onto the street, and because the car driver was going too fast; the woman died because the disease was particularly aggressive, or because she sought treatment too late. The man was murdered because his assailant was violent and his victim happened to get in his way.

Dig a little deeper, and you might come up with yet more answers, for the events that lead up to a tragedy are rarely simple. The child was run over because her mother was distracted, and failed to hold her hand, or perhaps because the speed limit in the road was too high; the woman died because she inherited particular genes, or perhaps because traffic pollution affected her. The man was killed because his murderer was high on drink or drugs, or perhaps had a mental illness.

Sometimes the questions end there, and the victim's relatives will nurse their loss and try – in vain – to forget. But often the 'Why?' will take another twist; no longer just 'Why?' in the sense of 'What caused this to happen?' but

something approaching 'What purpose does it serve?' Grieving relatives and friends try to find some meaning in what happened, and to bring something positive out of the tragedy. They campaign for safer roads, for medical research, for gun-control; they set up scholarships to help others, plant trees or commission benches to bring pleasure to others. Look no further than this College to find examples of these things.

Why did Jesus die? At the historical level, there are some obvious answers: he died because he offended the Jewish authorities, who regarded him as a blasphemer; he died because he was seen as a danger by the Roman authorities, who dealt with him as they dealt with all possible rebels and trouble-makers. Ask a few more questions, and you may say his death came about because one of his own disciples, Judas, betrayed his whereabouts, or even because Jesus himself insisted on going to Jerusalem, and so putting his head into a noose. But when Christians ask the question 'Why did Jesus die?' they are not particularly interested in the historical problems, but mean rather 'What was the purpose of Jesus' death?' For if it happened, that must surely mean that God allowed it to happen. Does this mean that he intended it to happen? If so, why?

I do not intend to get myself enmeshed tonight in a debate about predestination and freewill – far too big a topic for one address. It is enough to point out that the first disciples of Jesus, devastated by his death, did not have long to wait for an answer to their question. Three days after Jesus' death, they became convinced that he had been raised from the dead. Here was the answer – here was the meaning. God had vindicated Jesus, proved him innocent. But more than this, they themselves, believing in what God had done, experienced a sense of new life, which they described graphically as the coming of the Holy Spirit, enabling them to start all over again. They realized that God was, as it were, on their side, and that in some mysterious way Jesus' death had led to their new life. The answer to the question 'Why?' was found in their own changed lives. There was no need for them to campaign for safer roads or gun control,

or to plant trees or donate benches. It was enough for them to start telling everyone what had happened, and turning the world upside down.

But how were they to explain what had happened? How were they to convince others that the death and resurrection of Jesus were meaningful?

Read the New Testament, and you will find its authors groping to find good ways to express their significance. And of course they used the language and images of the day.

One of the earliest explanations is the simple 'Christ died for our sins'. But what does that mean? How does his death affect our sins? An obvious metaphor for what had taken place was that of sacrifice, for sacrifice was an everyday occurrence in the ancient world. Why did one offer sacrifice? One reason was to appease the anger of the gods – but that's not an image that is used in the New Testament. Another was to offer thanks – a gift, as it were, to God – a common idea in the Old Testament. And yet another reason was to atone for sin – the blood of the slaughtered animal in some mysterious way cleansing the people and opening up the way to God. The notion of sacrifice belongs to another era and another world, and yet we still use the image; we speak of someone sacrificing themselves for the sake of others – a demonstration of love. And love is a term used frequently in the New Testament for what happened in Christ's death. Perhaps the most famous quotation in the whole book is found in John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....'

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews used the imagery of one particular sacrifice which was offered once a year in the Jerusalem Temple. He likens Jesus to the high priest, who would enter the holiest part of the Temple on the Day of the Atonement, and cleanse the altar of sin, with the blood of an animal. But Jesus needed to do this only once – and the sacrifice he offered was himself! So sin, the barrier that separated men and women from God, was done away for all time. St Paul uses all sorts of metaphors. Christ's death, he says, is like that of the Passover lamb, killed when in Egypt, and seen by the Jews as the means by which they escaped from slavery in that land. Paul talks very little about sins, but rather about Sin – an alien force, which enslaves men and women and from which they need to be set free. Through Christ's death, he declares, men and women have been redeemed, set free, from slavery to sin. Or again, on the cross, Christ did battle against the powers of darkness and defeated them. But whatever image Paul uses – and there are plenty more – the words he uses again and again are 'grace' – a word which refers to God's gifts – and 'love'.

One of our problems, of course, is that the metaphors used in the New Testament are no longer familiar to us: the Temple was destroyed in AD 70, and with it Temple worship came to a full-stop. Unless we are Jewish, we no longer celebrate the Passover each year, in remembrance of what happened all those years ago in Egypt. Nor do we use the word 'redeemed' any more – unless, that is, we are driven to pawning our property, and then want to 'redeem' it

– to buy it back; but in Paul’s time, slaves were regularly redeemed from slavery – they bought their freedom and were set free. And though millions religiously read their horoscopes to see what the astrological forces may be up to, we no longer think of malevolent powers controlling the universe. If theology is to be relevant, then theologians need to use the language and ideas of each successive age, not just those of the past.

So where did this notion that God was unable to forgive our sins without exacting punishment come from? I have two suggestions. Firstly, it is easy to take a particular biblical idea out of context and distort it. Our biblical writers do take sin seriously. The last two verses of our NT reading recognized that those who refuse to accept God’s offer of forgiveness are turning their backs on God. When salvation is refused, what we call ‘punishment’ is inevitable. But the rest of the parable stressed God’s incredible forgiveness. Or take passages which

Stress the sinlessness of Christ. Did that mean, people asked, that he died as a substitute for the guilty?

My second explanation is this; later theologians did what our New Testament writers did, and what I have just said all theologians need to do – they used the ideas and language of their times to express their beliefs. Because they lived in a world ruled by Rome, where ‘justice’ demanded that wrongdoers were punished for their sins, some of them stressed the idea that God was a judge, who insisted that the debt must be paid. Whereas Paul, for example, had insisted that the grace of God was far greater than all human sin, and that this grace was demonstrated in free forgiveness for those who turned their backs on their old lives, God was now seen as a God who demanded punishment. And if sinners could not pay the debt, then it must have been paid by Christ. Justice demanded it! How else could God forgive them? One can see the logic in their reasoning, but somewhere along the line the loving and gracious God of the Bible became the ‘just’ (or perhaps we should say ‘unjust’!) and unforgiving God of the law-courts. And here is the basis for Richard Dawkins’ parody. But what he is mocking is not the God who revealed himself in the cross, but a God who has been created in the image of man.

Early theologians spent many years trying to define the person of Christ, and they wanted, too, to explain why Christ died. But they found it impossible to come to agreement, and when it came to summarizing their faith in the creeds, they wisely stuck to that simple ‘Christ died for our sins’, and left believers to work out ‘how’ for themselves. For ultimately, what they were trying to define is an experience – and an experience is, by definition, something that we interpret in our own terms. Christians may well experience forgiveness following sin, life emerging from death, without being able to say how or why. Which, of course, is why the author of our second hymn[1] was wise enough to confess that though she could not understand how or why, she nevertheless knew that Christ was her Saviour, and left it at that.

[1] Dora Greenwell. Her hymn begins:

‘I am not skilled to understand
What God has willed, what God has planned;
I only know at his right hand
Stands one who is my Saviour.’

Dora Greenwell.

Human Suffering – Divine Indifference

Mrs Irena Milloy, Sunday March 3rd 2013

Robinson College Chapel

'Cancer' Simon said, 'could you talk about cancer in the light of the title of this term's theme?'

He was aware that we as a family had just had a 12 week whistle stop journey from health to death with a relative diagnosed with the disease.

He was aware that I have a very strong faith.

What he didn't know, was that for many years I had another quite separate career as a nursing sister.

The presence of suffering in the world be it at a personal or global level, must be the most understandable reason to deny the existence of a loving God. The God who can permit these abominations to human wellbeing must be malevolent, certainly indifferent; ergo it is easy to deny any existence.

Human suffering has always, will always be a part of being human; pain, anguish, distress, misery, agony, anger, torment, fear. The experience of suffering is part of being alive in this world where we find love, laughter and unselfish devotion but yes, juxtaposed with cruelty, devastation and disaster.

All these negative emotions sweep over people given the diagnosis of cancer, or indeed any terminal illness. Not necessarily all at once; for many the first feeling will be numbness, having just heard what they might have known deep down but didn't want to hear. The rest will follow, as the enormity of the diagnosis is comprehended. They are the lucky ones. They are the ones with whom the medical practitioner has been straight; with whom he has not talked in clichés.

How many times do we hear the nebulous expression 'a growth' or 'a tumour' or 'a little lump' or the even more tenuous 'a few suspect cells? Clearly one hopes they will be just that and benign. Or people suddenly drop their voices in a parody of Les Dawson when it comes to mentioning 'the big C' or cancer.

Leaving medical matters to one side, there comes a point quite soon when faith is talked or at least thought about and in particular, God, because where is he? The need to blame someone for a problem is inherent in the human psyche and helps one to cope with the fall-out of a situation., whether it's who pranged the car or who was responsible for an epidemic. With a diagnosis of terminal illness or for that matter any other catastrophe the need to apportion blame is almost in direct proportion to the enormity of the verdict. 'She's such a lovely person, she didn't deserve that', 'they are a good family it's so unfair'. And there is no shortage of people ready to share their understanding of God as a malevolent divinity; 'Why doesn't He stop the worlds suffering, wars, starvation, global meteorological catastrophes?' They vent their spleens in print from the tabloids to academic papers and back again. One can at least say they are acknowledging a God albeit one with divine indifference.

Atheism from a repugnance of suffering though is very understandable. Conversely, there are those who accent to creedal propositions as an insurance, sort of faith of the mouth if not the heart, just going through the motions to keep all ones bases covered.

Worse still are vacuous words, like an oleaginous cloak, from the lips of the sympathetic as they attempt to second guess the help and support that the sufferer's faith must be to them. MUST be to them! There is no MUST about it right at this moment.

For people of faith or non there are many paths to be chosen; and not always chosen, the response is often so immediate that retrospectively a patient will admit that they didn't ever expect to react in 'that way'. Initial reaction will likely be to admit to being very frightened, then maybe to seek support divine or otherwise from ones closest family and friends. For Christians, very early on, prayer support and the loving, listening presence of a fellow believer will be the foundation upon which the coping will be built.

The more emotionally vulnerable are those who feel the need to be overtly cheery and outwardly verbose about how their faith or self determination will see them through whatever is to come. I have no doubt it will; but going up in a balloon of spiritual hot air or borne up on a cloud of adrenalin infused optimism might precipitate a rather deeper and ultimately more painful decent into mortal reality. What about the angry person? The thing about God, and I say this only as my perception of his magnificence, is that he can take any amount of our anger and hatred. So for the truly let down and deeply hurt Christian there is the knowledge that behind and above and underneath all the torrent of invective there is His love. For the atheist needing a punch bag anything which comes to mind will do.

So after this vehemently physical outburst one prays there is some peace. Not like a tissue being wiped across a few tears but something which takes much longer to work through but eventually brings a deep awareness that one is not alone. Making sense of the challenges ahead has to be a more visceral response and cannot be merely intellectualised. Asking for help, acknowledging the need for help, is the beginning prayer; it is not merely resigning oneself to the mercy or lack of it of a tyrannical God.

Human suffering, yes. Divine indifference, never. I have had the great privilege of being with many people and their relatives as a loved one dies and there is dignity in death from believers and unbelievers alike. I would hate to suggest that only people of faith can cope. And, it has been my experience that the longer and more protracted the illness, the more people start to say things, like, 'I wish they could just go'.

I imagine that some of the students here are wondering what all this talk of death has to do with them. Here's a fact. 70 to 80% of students will encounter the loss of a relative during their time at Cambridge. In the words of the immortal Monty Python 'Life is terminal' 'Death is alive and happening'. So, however it is viewed, whether from the distance of youth or the proximity of years it is a surety. There is comfort in the gentle demise whilst sleeping, of an elderly loved one. There is horror and disbelief at the loss of a promising young life knocked off their bike in town here. Is there divine indifference to either of these extremes?

How can God let the latter happen? How can any divine being allow, permit, sit back and watch, whilst a young promising light is snuffed out?

Ok, Divine Indifference - looks like it.

How can we believe in a God who permits such suffering? And how good it is that that question is constantly asked. God is not the ultimate puppeteer of our lives. We live in society with other human beings and the dynamics of this symbiosis work best when there is order and regularity. Cause and effect become analytical dimensions of our intellectual interpretation of our society, termite mound or city, each has a viable survival system by which that society works best. So, is there not something extraordinarily disingenuous about expecting God to put in an appearance and tweak the strings when things are getting out of hand, scary, or dangerous? Would we feel happier if we thought he would? --- Or --- might we be rather afraid of a God who by his, albeit omnipotent interference, can, like a Faustian Lord of Misrule, throw a spanner into the works of an individual's life by creating pain and sickness and mourning and grief?

The French philosopher Paul Claudel wrote:- 'Jesus did not come to explain suffering nor to take it away, he came to fill it with his presence'.

Praying with pain, physical and mental is not a childish or cowardly submission; it is actually a brave and courageous step of commitment to a sharing of the load and an acknowledgement of need, of human suffering. For those whose philosophy is one of Divine Indifference there will of course still be strength to be gained from the support of another human being, a poem, a piece of music, a sunset and good it is. The commitment of me to my faith in no way diminishes or decries the comfort gained in other places without any Godly reference.

Even within the Bible many writers railed against Divine Indifference, raging at God for their misfortunes; the Psalms are peppered with them:- 'though has made us like sheep for slaughter. Ps 44. Jeremiah the prophet called God a 'deceitful brook' with 'waters that fail' Jesus himself cried out 'My God My God why has though forsaken me'.

Divine indifference? How about human indifference? It is as facile to blame God as to accept the situation by shrugging it off with 'well it must be God's will' in other words we are indifferent to His doings in our lives for good or ill.

I think there is a difference between what God wills directly and what he allows to happen because the world is what it is. Take the student knocked off his bike and killed. When his parents allowed him to come up to Cambridge and bring his bike, their permission included the risk of an accident. Obviously they didn't WILL that outcome. In modern parlance – stuff happens.

So with God, his creation is a huge risk. Fire burns, water drowns, but both are essential for life.

The fact that we question and ask why is evidence for hope. We were not created heartless robots. But, God is way beyond our human grasp and therefore way beyond our ability to give rational explanations for bad situations. Suffering remains a mystery and our response to it can only be a mixture of wonder and anger, anger and wonder. The familiarity of our experience is stripped away and in our naked need we are prey to thoughts of divine indifference and indeed our own indifference to the divine. Yet God is there, right there with us. St John the Divine, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouen have all written far more eloquently than I ever could about the dark night of the soul; about how being emptied of any emotion other than total and utter lifeless rejection and unworthiness has immeasurable value. At this lowest ebb is where they found the most sublime, the most supreme place; in their emotional nakedness they could acknowledge 'Lord I am nothing, you are all'.

And at that moment the two elements of this series of talks become one, become fused together. Thoughts of human suffering and divine indifference become words; concepts of mean human boundaries which once released from can be replaced with burning light, relief and submission to the numinous. In the words of St John of the cross:- 'the endurance of darkness is preparation for great light'.

It may well be argued that the two sides of a discussion on the indifference of the divine to human suffering, those who believe and those who don't, are not likely to ever be brought to compliance. However, when the chips are down and all seems bleak, I have witnessed many so called agnostics seeking solace in the hospital chapel saying the Lords Prayer, dug up from the depths of a remembered school assembly. I have sat with people in the stillness of a hospital side ward who feel a deep sense of something they can't fathom. Divine indifference? I don't think so.

Thomas Merton wrote

We must confront obstacles, we must face reality. We can't sink into suffocating sentimentality for this would be a false sanctuary consoled by an imaginary Christ'.

The last words I leave to Rowan Williams from a piece he wrote for the Sunday Telegraph following the Asian Tsunami in 2005. :-

'The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again – not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them. They have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others. They have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence. These convictions are terribly assaulted by all those other facts of human experience that seem to point to a completely arbitrary world but people still feel bound to them, not for comfort or ease but because they have imposed themselves on the shape of a life and the habits of a heart'.

Human Suffering Yes.

Divine Indifference Never.

God in Pain

Simon Perry

10th March, 2013

A recent study conducted by neuroscientists at University College London set out to find the Neurological basis for empathy – that is, the capacity to enter into another’s pain. Using MRI scanners scientists observed the brain’s reactions to feeling pain in both men and women. A small electric shock was given to the woman – with the result that a certain area of their brain would light up to indicate the experience of pain. However, when these women saw their male partners receive precisely the same kind of shock – the same area of their brain would light up to indicate that they literally felt the pain of their partners as if that pain had been inflicted upon them.

When the same experiment was repeated on men – sure enough, when they received the electric shock, and felt their own pain - their brain lit up in the same area. But – when the men watched their female partners having pain inflicted on them... Nothing! No lights coming on. No empathy! Proof, it seems, of gender differences!

This term we have looked at the issue of human suffering and divine indifference. And most of our invited speakers, whether speaking about the Holocaust, or Crucifixion, or Cancer, inverted the order – and spoke of divine suffering and human indifference. What does it mean for God to suffer? Can god suffer? What does it mean for god to enter into the pain of another?

Evolutionarily speaking, it is still very recent history where the caricature of the man as hunter-gatherer and the woman as nurturing home-maker were a stark reality. And it is widely concluded that this is why women’s brains developed certain sensitivities, peripheral awareness and the capacity to multi-task – that men simply hadn’t developed. If your role is to protect the homestead from predators, you need a different set of abilities to your role if your job is to seek, locate, hunt, kill. So, it is thought, that women are more sensitive to the pain of those whom they protect and care for, more able – that is – to empathise. Empathy, it seems, is an essential aspect of nurturing, protecting caring.

Stated differently, to offer care, protection, love – is to be ready to enter into the pain of those we love. If you want a life free of suffering and pain – then be sure that you never love anyone or anything. To love is to root your own wellbeing in the wellbeing of those you love – those for whom you care. Whatever pain they face, you face. To love at all, said C.S.Lewis, is to be vulnerable. Love anything at all and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.

Richard Dawkins points out that – if God really is all knowing and all powerful, could he not come up anything better than cramming his eternal glory into a human being, having him tortured and executed, raising him from the dead and declaring sinners forgiven. Could God really not come up with anything better than that?

Of course, there is a different way of reading Scripture and Nature – that does not trade in caricatured versions of omnipotence, and sin and forgiveness and atonement. In scripture, life is a gift, a precious gift, that we honour most fully by engaging most openly with that which is ‘other’ or holy. In a violent world, the creator God does not simply wind everything up, get it going, then hurry off radar when his people need his support. This is a God who is intimately and actively involved with his people – a God who defines empathy.

Empathy- strictly speaking, is the capacity to enter into the suffering of another. Sympathy is the readiness to come together with those who suffer. Apathy – is the incapacity or refusal to suffer. Empathy is to enter into that suffering. That is why the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus are called, the Passion. It is the same root as em-pathy – the ability to be passive, to be on the receiving end, to suffer ... for the sake of something or someone greater.

Of course, passion means something different nowadays to what it used to mean. As David Mitchell points out, nowadays – we are confronted with adverts telling us that various commercial companies are passionate – Employees of Moodies' Tax Advisors are passionate about Tax Optimization, "Wow," says Mitchell, "imagine being so in touch with your inner emotional core that you can be passionate about tax, and not just tax, but tax optimization!"

Hammersmith and Fulham Council are passionate about improving customer focussed services; SCS furniture company are passionate about sofas! And, most impressively, John Hopkins University assure us, they are Passionate about everything they do!

I don't think this is the kind of passion that is generally anticipated during the season of Lent. When we see Jesus sweating drops of blood because of what awaits him after he is arrested. What kind of passion is this? This is not a passion designed to convince us that we should worship god because he really cares about what he does. This is a passion that is woven through the fabric of the cosmos:

That is – as humans, there are a million possible ways of getting things done, a million possible means of achieving our own ends; a million different strategies for making the world a better place. And if we are obsessed with an omnipotent God – then all those options are available. But the god of Scripture instead is a God whose being is revealed most fully in passion – in entering into the plight of others. In becoming human, in suffering, in experiencing failure and frustration and defeat. Faith – is the ability to follow this God on his journey to his passion. When Jesus said follow me, he was on his way to the cross.

And yet – it was through this radical empathy, this suffering with others, this entering into the world of another – that, whilst resembling failure in the short term, led to a radical restructuring of social and political reality in the longer term. Bearing all the hallmarks of failure, the crucifixion is nevertheless the expression of a God who suffers with his people in order to remake the world. Because, according to the Christian narrative, the crucifixion is not the end of the story.

However, the temptation is to skip over that which looks negative and accentuate the positive; to downplay that which resembles failure and highlight success, to fast-forward through the passion of Christ to arrive at resurrection. But the point of Lent is to slow down, and to tarry with the negative, to enter into the suffering of God with empathy – and in so doing to be exposed to a different understanding of the mechanics of the cosmos. The point is not to be bogged down in guilt at the death of God, but to encounter our world, and its creator and ourselves in a way that allows genuine hope and light and freedom to reach into the real depths of who we are and what the world is. Lent is where we learn to tarry with the negative, faith is where we learn the courage to endure suffering, and passion is where we embrace the pain of another.