

Sermon 24 November 24 2024

Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?

2 Corinthians 1:37 John 13:31-35

Every week we inevitably read in the newspapers or see on TV reports of a tragedy of some sort involving the suffering of innocent people. There would not be many people here in this church who have not been affected by some tragedy of some nature. Of all the questions put to me about God, one of the most common is, 'Why does God allow innocent people to suffer?' We have all asked ourselves at times, what Have I done to deserve this? Why should that happen to him or her, who doesn't deserve it?

I actually cannot really answer that question, but I do want to say, don't blame God. God takes no pleasure in our pain. On the contrary, it is in God that we find comfort, and that is what I want to explore for a few minutes.

God has given us creation, as we looked into last week. He has given us the natural world, encompassing the laws of nature. These laws of nature do not differentiate between a good person and a bad person. A falling rock has no way of knowing who is underneath and whether that person deserves to be hit on the head. It is simply obeying the law of gravity. A malignant tumour has no conscience, neither does a car out of control. So what is God doing? Where is God?

We can hope for and pray for miracles, and miracles do happen. The story is told of a boy who came home from Sunday school, having been taught the Biblical story of the crossing of the Red Sea. His mother asked him what he had learned in class and he told her, 'The Israelites got out of Egypt, but the Egyptian king and his army chased after them. They got to the Red Sea and they couldn't cross it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie talkie, the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptians and the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross.' His mother was shocked. 'Is that the way they taught you the story?' The boy admitted, 'Well, no, but if I told you the way it was told to us, you'd never believe it.'

By all means, pray for a miracle but let us not set our hearts on it, as we could well be disappointed. Instead, we pray for God's strength to cope with our pain, because I believe that it is in God we ultimately will find our answer and our comfort.

I do recall some years ago a young boy coming to see me very upset because his parents had separated. He said, 'Rev, I have prayed and prayed to God asking him to bring my parents back together, but he hasn't heard me.' I said to him, 'Mate, God has heard you and it is absolutely fine to ask God to fix your problem but the reality is that if every time we have a problem, God just fixes it for us, then life would be just too easy. It is actually in dealing with the problems we have in life that makes us the interesting people that we are. So, your prayer to God should be, "God, please give me the strength to deal with this problem."'

If we can make that our prayer to God, then two things are going to happen. Firstly, we will grow in character because it is in dealing with the trials and tribulations of life that our character is shaped and moulded. James puts it so very well: *'Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.'* James 1:2-4. As he always does, James hits the nail firmly and squarely on the head.

The other thing that happens, as James briefly alluded to, is that our faith also grows and develops. When we speak to God from the bottom of our heart, as we do when we are hurting, then we will surely find God. That is because we are being sincere and genuine, and that has to be the basis for any meaningful relationship.

I now want to refer to another way by which God lends a hand in times of distress, and that is through his agents, which, of course, is us – his people. Some years ago, someone I knew very well lost his young daughter. I asked him how this affected his faith; where did he see God in all of this? His reply was very

interesting. He told me that he didn't blame God, that this was not God's doing. Instead, he saw God in the outpouring of love and support he and his family had received from so many people. For me that really did sum up the role God plays when we are assailed by life's slings and arrows.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the best-selling book, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?', wrote, *'Human beings are God's language. When you have been hurt by life and you cry out to God, how does God respond? God responds by sending you people. God comes to you in the incarnation of caring, loving neighbours and friends. We need people. We need to know that we are cared about.'* That is God in action, and God uses us as his agents of action.

There is the story of the little boy whose mother sent him on an errand and it took him a long time to come home. When he finally got back, his mother said, 'Where were you? I was worried about you.' The boy said, 'There was a child down the street who was crying because his bicycle was broken and I felt bad so I stopped to help him' Then the mother said, 'But you don't know anything about fixing bicycles,' and the boy replies, 'No, of course not. I stopped and helped him cry.'

We can all help each other cry, and in the doing of that I believe God is expressing himself. We are invariably attempting to define God. I repeat a definition I have used before: *'God is the spirit of love working in people through people.'* There is no doubt that our Gospel reading lends credence to this definition: *'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.'*

Yes, there is certainly a significant degree of pain and sadness in the world, but I am uplifted and encouraged by what I see and what I experience in the goodness and love of God as expressed through the kindness and compassion conveyed by so many people.

The final word goes to Paul as phrased in our first reading: *'God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.'* 2 Corinthians 1:4. In the end, God cares for us enormously and in turn we can care for others. God works through us as we do that, and so we can righteously claim to be God's disciples. I couldn't think of a better reason for being, or as the French put it, my 'raison d'être.'