

Suffering

Any discussion about religion with non-Christians is likely to come round to the subject of suffering. If there is a God who is supposedly good and almighty why is there so much suffering in the world? Why does God not do something about it? Is God not perhaps as good or as almighty as he is claimed to be? And indeed such questions are often asked by Christians themselves.

We cannot deny the reality of suffering in our world today. It is all around us, not just in far off countries but in our own communities, even in our own homes. Much suffering is inflicted by other human beings, and not just physical suffering but also mental and emotional pain. But there is also suffering which appears to be outside of human control: natural disasters, disease, disability. Is God alone responsible for that? For we do indeed talk of acts of God.

Faced with such questions Christians do not have easy answers. But we cannot just ignore these questions. And indeed we can respond to them positively and honestly.

We believe that God is a God of compassionate love, of total goodness, of absolute justice. Suffering is not caused or initiated by God. The fallen and imperfect world in which we live is not as God intended. Yet out of his great love God gave human beings real freedom – freedom to choose good or evil, right or wrong. And even some natural disasters and diseases are not totally divorced from human responsibility.

In the Bible reading we just heard the writer of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the humanity and compassion of Jesus. Jesus may receive the glory and honour that is his due as God's Son but he does so having experienced true human suffering. Through Jesus God shares our suffering. And that sharing in the human condition is a testimony to his love for his creation.

We may not be able to answer the question: *why* is there suffering and pain in the world. But we can assert that God faces that suffering head on through the cross of Jesus. He shows us that while there may still be suffering now, in the end suffering and earth have already been overcome, conquered. That is the Christian hope and the underpinning of our faith in God who is love.

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