

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Trusting the God who suffered

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a man to whom life had been kind. He lived in very comfortable circumstances, and may have been tempted to think, as we are, that that was how it should be, since all his life he'd striven to do the right thing. Certainly he'd provided well for his family - for their spiritual as well as their material needs - and had reason to believe he'd earned the comforts and respect he enjoyed.

But one day disaster struck. In fact, Job - the Job of the Bible story - suffered one disaster after another: the loss of his property, all ten of his children and finally his health, until his wife urged him to curse God and die. What was the point of living, if such overwhelming loss and grief were his reward for doing his best?

But there was a deeper reality at work which Job knew nothing about. The forces of evil were out to prove *their* point: that Job only obeyed God out of self-interest - that if he lost the blessings he enjoyed, he *would* curse God.

I

How did Job respond to the loss of his wealth, his home, his children and his health? As he sat among the ashes, with his wife urging him to curse God, he said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the Lord's name be blessed."

At one point in his dialogue with God he said to him, "Though you slay me, yet will I trust you."

Job's story raises the question we've all asked at one time or another: How can a good God allow such bad things to happen? More especially, why does he allow good people to suffer?

The friends who came to comfort Job felt they had the answer: of course God wouldn't allow it. Their logic was: if God is God, he has the power to avert disaster. Because he loves us he'll see no harm comes to us. But being God he must also deal with evil. So if he was allowing Job to suffer, Job must have done something wrong. Julie Andrews' character in *The Sound of Music* expressed a similar thought: that in being allowed to be happy, she must have done something good.

That idea is enshrined in the ancient belief that the bad things that happen to you are payback for the bad things you've done. But that doesn't seem to fit all cases. For instance, what's a tiny baby done to deserve suffering? That problem's solved by a belief in reincarnation, so that the bad things that happen are payback for the bad things you did *in a former existence*. By its very nature there can be no evidence for that belief, but still we find it attractive, perhaps because we like to think this life's not all there is. For the sufferer belief in karma provides no comfort, but the justice of it appeals, and it's alive and well as an age-old attempt to say why suffering exists.

Another centuries-old belief-system makes no attempt to explain why we suffer, but does tell us how to respond. We're to accept suffering as the inscrutable, unalterable will of the Supreme Being. We have no right to ask questions, as Job did. We're simply to endure it.

The Buddha was a man who more than others wrestled with the problem of suffering and came up with a way to try to cope. He saw that we suffer when we don't get what we desire. So if we can detach ourselves, rid ourselves of desire, we're released from suffering. He recommended various disciplines like meditation and fasting, by which we can learn to detach ourselves. The question is, is it really possible to do that? Even when our desires are twisted by self-centredness, they're part of what we are.

Such a state of detachment is a far cry from what Christians believe - that God out of self-giving love entered into our suffering, involving himself body and soul in the worst this world could do. He then overcame the power of death itself to signal the end of all suffering, and the renewal of his perfect creation.

II

In his little book, *If I Were God I'd End All the Pain*, John Dickson outlines the various answers to the question *How can a good God allow suffering?* He concludes that from where we're standing now there's no really satisfying answer. What we do have from the four belief-systems of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are four different approaches to the problem: the idea of karma, unquestioning acceptance, the attempt to detach ourselves, and the God who took on suffering to signal its end. We respect each others' right to hold our different views, but have to accept they are different.

Another approach is based on the belief there is no God and the universe is blindly and pitilessly indifferent to our fate. If that's so, there's no point getting upset about suffering. If, as Richard Dawkins says, we're the result of a huge, cosmic fluke, dancing to the tune of our DNA, why should we care if some of us are in pain or get wiped out? But the fact remains that we do care, and it's a problem for us precisely because we suspect there is a Creator who should have our interests at heart.

Job responded to the disasters that befell him by affirming his trust in God - a response quite different from that of a character in the long-running cop-show *The Bill*. His only daughter, twenty-three years old, was brutally murdered by an ex-boyfriend. Absorbed in grief he held the police responsible, and planned to avenge her by murdering a policeman. His chance victim was a man even younger than his daughter, out on his first day on the job, full of youthful idealism and thrilled to be fulfilling his dream. The policewoman with him when he died felt responsible and vowed to his mother that she'd find the killer. But not having seen him properly she couldn't provide the positive ID which was the only way to get him. She was, however, convinced of the father's guilt, and told him he was as bad as the man who'd killed his daughter. Finally he confessed to her, before trying to kill himself, whereupon she risked her own life to keep him alive. Recovering in hospital he asked to see her. He wanted to know why she hadn't let him die. She said she wanted him to answer for what he'd done. To which he replied, "So you're the same as me, because *you* wanted revenge." "Not revenge," she said. "I want justice for the man you murdered. There was no way he was responsible for your daughter's death."

Wanting to lash out and hurt whoever we perceive has hurt us is one response we can make. We can lash out at God or conclude he's not there. We can sink into bitterness and despair. However we react, one thing's sure - not one of us will escape some form of suffering - a traumatic accident, bereavement, broken relationships, an incurable illness, to name a few. We live in a world seriously out of whack and we allshare in the general loss and damage that result, just as we all, in varying degrees, contribute to that loss and damage.

III

How can we respond to suffering in a way that will help us through it? Jesus' brother James once wrote a letter to his fellow-Christians, some of whom were going through hard times. James reminded them of the example Job had set them, by persevering through terrible suffering. He reassured them that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, and then called on any who were suffering to pray - to talk to the God who

showed how much he loves us by suffering on our behalf. To use James' own words, "If anyone of you is suffering, you should pray."

James doesn't specify praying for an end to the suffering, though that's a perfectly legitimate prayer. He goes on to mention three kinds of prayer - firstly praise to God for whatever we still have to be happy about - and there's always something for which to be thankful, even in the midst of suffering. We can also ask God for what we need, and James specifically mentions healing. And we should confess the things we've got wrong, bringing to God any burden of guilt we bear.

So what's so good about prayer? In its essence it's turning to God and depending on him, and that is our right relationship with him - the one for which we exist. Our tendency to turn away from God ensures we don't naturally have it, but through Christ's suffering on our behalf the door into it's been re-opened. As we trust in his death and resurrection for us, he puts us right with God. And, James concludes, the prayer of anyone who's put right with God is powerful and effective.

As an example of just how effective such prayer is, James reminded his hearers of something that had happened long before, but which had never been forgotten. "Elijah," he said, "was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops."

To pray in the face of suffering is what Jesus himself did. For him it was a level of suffering we can't begin to imagine. He knew he'd be hung on a cross and the night before that happened he went to pray in the Gethsemane Garden. He did pray for a way out of the suffering: "If possible let this cup of suffering pass from me." In his humanness he shrank from the physical and emotional pain he could imagine all too well. But as he'd already made clear, he and God the Father are one - the God who in eternity willed that he would suffer. So he put aside how he felt as a human and submitted to that will. Certainly it was a plan no mere mortal could have come up with it - that God himself would suffer on our behalf the awful consequences of the evil we're all capable of. Jesus found the strength he'd need to pay the cost of the destruction human self-centredness has brought on the world, and he found it through prayer - confiding in God the Father as the Holy Spirit worked in him.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, "*If you have a burden on your back you shall carry it much better if you pray.*"

In the fourth century, the North African Christian Augustine wrote, "*I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are wise and very beautiful, but I have never read in either of them anything like [the words of] Jesus: 'Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'*"

And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned and then hanged for opposing Hitler, wrote this, "*God in his sovereignty chose to be weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way - the only way - through which he is with us and helps us. Only the suffering God can help.*"

Our great God and Father, we're so thankful Christ was willing to suffer on our behalf, and that, in the trials we bear and the distress and confusion we feel, he is with us. Help us to do like Job, and keep on praying and trusting. Amen.