

God in the Midst of Suffering

John W Olley

After a time in theoretical physics research John Olley moved into biblical studies, lecturing in theological colleges and universities. Throughout this time he has maintained a keen interest in issues of science and faith. At the time of the presentation of this paper he was interim Principal of the Bible College of Victoria, having previously retired from being Principal of the Baptist Theological College of Western Australia.

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the joint ISCAST/CMDF seminar, 'Cold Comfort', Melbourne, 21 May 2005.

Abstract

After a brief review of historic Christian responses to suffering and natural disasters, a variety of biblical perspectives are considered. The presence of God is seen as the key, above all demonstrated in the incarnation of Christ. From this flows the important role of Christian presence in situations of suffering and disaster.

Key words

Suffering, natural disasters, tsunamis, theodicy, Christ, creation.

Suffering is part of life, but where are the answers?

The Lisbon earthquake and the associated tsunami in 1755 was devastating, the largest to hit Europe. Its effects were not only loss of life, injury and physical destruction, but a major shock for faith and for theology. Lisbon was not only the capital of a devout Catholic country but the disaster happened on All Saints Day, a religious holiday. Almost all important church buildings were destroyed, killing worshippers gathered in the Cathedral (Wikipedia contributors 2006).

For centuries in all cultures disasters were, and in some places still are, associated with the anger of the gods. In the Christian Church events such as the Black Death and other plagues had been evidence of God's wrath against some wrongdoing in society. Obviously repentance was required, linked with special offerings. Sadly at other times there was the quest for scapegoats, whether Jews or witches.

The rise of the Enlightenment brought with it Deistic thinking, belief in a God who had set the world in operation but who was not involved in daily life. In 1710, in *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, the German philosopher Leibniz had coined the term 'theodicy' (justifying the ways of God). He sought to show that evil in the world does not conflict with the goodness of God; to the contrary, notwithstanding its many evils, the world is the best of all possible worlds (Packer 1988 pp. 670–680). After the earthquake, the skeptic Voltaire wrote *Candide*, a satire on this view, based on the arbitrariness of the damage. And that remains the issue: natural disasters are random in their effect.

1945 saw the end of World War II in Europe and the revealing of the full horror and extent of the Holocaust. The decades since have seen writing on the mystery of evil. For many Jews the question has been 'Where is God?'. Christians and others have joined in the questioning, 'Where is God in the face of such human injustice? Why doesn't he do something?' (Davis 2005).

Then on Boxing Day 2004 the Asian Tsunami hit. Around the world today hundreds of thousands are dying due to human injustice, political oppression and selfishness, especially but not only in Africa. But this was a natural disaster. No one could blame human actions. Again where is God?

These events are large-scale, the deaths of thousands, even millions. They are out-of-the-ordinary and certainly newsworthy. But the same issues arise in the experience of individuals: in the day to day lives of each of us, whether ourselves personally or people in our families or people amongst whom we work; the same issues of, 'Why does God...? Where is God....? How can there be a god...?'

Reflecting on some Biblical Perspectives

Psalms 107 is one biblical passage that brings together the whole gamut of suffering and pain: hunger, thirst, homelessness, refugees; prisoners and slaves, sick, near to death, storms at sea, drought and famine, oppression. Irrespective of the cause, this psalm asserts that all are cases where God's people came to experience God's presence and deliverance.

Certainly some human suffering is the result of individual human wrongdoing and alienation from God—even matters of diet and habits! Yet much is the result of wrongdoing expressed corporately—consider matters such as distribution of health care, employment policies, environmental misuse, inequitable food distribution in the world, political oppression, national selfishness and pride. *How much suffering results from our failure to love God, to love our neighbour as ourselves and to care for the world as God's representatives?*

In this respect I believe we can rightly speak of suffering as God's judgment, sometimes worked out in terms of the way the world is structured, 'we reap what we sow'. Poor sanitation and polluted water will mean much more sickness and death!

Sadly, this is often interpreted individually. How often do we hear, 'What have I done wrong?'. The opposite is expressed in Maria's song in *The Sound of Music*: 'Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good!' It is such individualising that Jesus speaks against when he is asked, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:2 NIV). I believe it much more helpful to think in terms of corporate responsibility, 'we are in this together'.

What about natural disasters?

Here is a mystery that I believe the Scriptures hint at, without explaining. Sometimes the statements of Genesis that 'God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:31) are taken to rule out any pre-fall tension, pain or suffering, with the implication that all was a 'garden' (much is made of this by groups such as Creation Science). There are however hints in Genesis 1-3 itself that this is a superficial reading, importing our view of 'good', rather than seeing 'good' as conforming to God's purpose:

- humans are to 'subdue' and 'rule' (Gen 1:28), both strong words: if all is peaceful, why 'subdue'?¹.
- the image of 'garden' is localized, taking up the common practice of rulers having their own pleasure gardens ('paradise') attached to their palace.
- the 'pain' of childbearing is increased, not initiated.
- 'thorns and thistles' are outside the garden, where the majority of the created order is.
- And later there is a recognition of the violence in the animal world (Gen 9:4)

There is also a vision that the *violence that is part of the structure of this present order is not God's ultimate purpose*. Instead of 'creation' being a finished work, God is still at work. Thus there is the vision of 'the lion and the lamb' (Isa 11:6-9; 65:25; see Olley 2001 pp. 219-229). Somehow the created order as we know it is related to human rebellion—but also shares in human redemption. The hope for the future is the 'new creation' that is born from the present (especially in Romans 8:18-39).

It is sometimes commented that suffering and disasters *often result in character growth and in the doing of good that otherwise does not happen*. Think of the response of Australian generosity to the tsunami relief and the involvement of Australian defence forces in humanitarian aid. Think of the dedicated service of medical professionals in many situations. Recently my younger daughter faced a brain tumour and resulting fibromyalgia—she speaks openly of spiritual growth through the experience. This does not always happen (so I say 'often'), but it seems God has made us in such a way that tragedy provides an opportunity for

¹ A brief comment, since this opens up areas wider than our topic: the wider setting of scripture argues strongly against a common exploitative interpretation, especially since in the ancient Near East as in Scripture, rulers are to rule for the benefit of their subjects!

the expression of goodness. However, I do not believe we can say, 'God caused me to suffer *because* I need to grow' (that was a view of Job's friends)—but in suffering God acts to bring good (as he did above all in the Cross). There is a difference between purpose and result.

Having mentioned Job, let's turn to that book. Job's friends express all the traditional answers, answers still heard today, sometimes from the pulpit. However, they are wrong, and Job's outbursts have been appropriate! God himself says, 'Job's friends have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (Job 42:7 NIV). To quote Carol Newsom in her recent commentary:

There is a tendency to assume every single issue has a single answer... But some things that trouble us are dilemmas with which we must continue to live. What the book of Job models is a community of voices struggling to articulate a range of perspectives, each one of which contains valid insights as well as blindness to other dimensions of the problem.

(Newsom 1996, p. 637)

In company with people through the millennia and across the globe, Job certainly looks for answers. But he does not find the answer directly in words. Rather God speaks to him and highlights his control as Creator (Job 38-41). He points to those parts of the creation that are outside human control (and here we are reminded of tsunamis and earthquakes and weather patterns) and to animals that are wild. The world is more than humankind and our comprehension—and God is Creator of all.

However Job is satisfied—*his answer is found in relationship*.

That God speaks (to him) at all is enough for Job. All he needs to know is that everything is still all right between himself and God.

(Andersen 1976, p. 269)

We are able to go beyond Job and see in Christ the wonder of *the Incarnation*. Here is God with us in the midst of suffering—amazingly participating in suffering. God shares our pain². Here is no theological or philosophical debate, but rather a relationship. He is with us, we are not alone. As we see the people Christ mixed with we see God coming to us, as we are, no matter who we are.

God's presence however is never simply a maintenance of the *status quo*. There is a future, for his presence leads on to the cross, where humanly speaking we have the ultimate meaningless pain and the absence of God. Yet here God was present, bringing the promise of new beginning, revealed clearly in the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ, victory over pain and suffering and evil, is not all: this is the 'firstfruits', the

² The suffering of God in Christ has been a focus of much theological reflection since the publication of *The Crucified God* (Moltmann 1974).

guarantee of the full harvest to come (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:20; James 1:18). The resurrection affirms the importance and transformation of the physical.

The Incarnation, leading to Cross and resurrection, shows that *at the core of everything is a personal God who is love*. The world is not unfriendly chaos. At its heart is God who is personal, who loves sacrificially.

How then do we live with suffering?

The Incarnation (as also the history of Israel in the Old Testament) points to the priority of being with people.

The day after the tsunami hit, as Tim Costello of World Vision Australia was leaving for Sri Lanka he was asked what he hoped to accomplish. His words have stuck in my mind, 'I am going to stand alongside the Sri Lankans to assure them, "You are not alone".'

Some years ago I supervised a theology honours thesis by a student who was a GP. He decided to look at suffering and pain in the Psalms and was surprised at the result—and it changed his practice. He noted that the main anguish was not physical pain but social isolation, being forsaken by friends, not participating in social activities, and being accused as a wrongdoer. Are there not similar experiences today: the social isolation, especially when the condition is long-term or even life-long, the gradual moving away of friends, the feeling of uselessness in a society which emphasises economic productivity, and consequently guilt that 'I am a nuisance or a burden'?

Response to 'Why suffering?'

We may use words to give some answers, but almost always they are inadequate or, like Job's friends', are inappropriate. The most significant answer is to '*be with*': affirming that 'you are not alone, you have worth'. Being with certainly includes doing what is possible to alleviate the pain, which may present predominantly as physical—but just as important are the social, psychological and spiritual pain. Christ comes to heal the whole person. In this way we are pointing to the future God is bringing about.

Be the presence of God who himself suffers, but who brings deliverance and renewal.

References:

Andersen, FI 1976, *Job*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester.

Davis, JJ 2005, 'The Holocaust and the problem of theodicy: an Evangelical perspective', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 29(1), pp. 52–76.

Moltmann, J 1974, *The Crucified God*, SCM Press, London.

John W Olley

Newsom, CA 1996, 'The Book of Job', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, Nashville, vol. 4, pp. 317–637.

Olley, JW 2001, "'The Wolf, the Lamb, and a Little Child": Transforming the Diverse Earth Community in Isaiah', in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, eds, NC Habel and S Wurst, *The Earth Bible 4*; Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.

Packer, JI 1988, 'Theodicy', in *New dictionary of theology*, ed., SB Ferguson and DF Wright, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester.

Wikipedia contributors 2006, *1755 Lisbon earthquake*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, viewed 15 May 2006,
http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=1755_Lisbon_earthquake&oldid=52321461