

There are some questions in life which have easy answers, some questions which have multiple answers, and some which, frankly, there seems no answer to at all. This morning I am taking one of those such questions... Why is there evil in the world? Particularly in the light of Covid and the Ukraine...

Theologians and philosophers have discussed the matter of evil and suffering for centuries. So don't expect simple answers!

In the light of Coronavirus, and Italian Journalist wrote this in the New York times:

*“Holy water is not hand sanitizer and prayer if not a vaccine... But for believers, religion is a fundamental source of spiritual healing and hope. It’s a remedy against despair providing psychological and emotional support and is an integral part of well-being... At a deeper level, religion for worshippers, is the ultimate source of meaning. The most profound claim of every religion is to make sense of the whole existence, including and perhaps especially circumstances marked by suffering and tribulation. Take such claims seriously enough, and even physical health, when it is devoid of greater purpose, starts to look like a hollow value.”*

As Christians we start at a different place to others.

We may like to think about the world as a jigsaw puzzle. God made a beautiful picture in creation, but we've made a bit of a mess of it and the pieces are all over the place. Some of the edges are still together, there's beauty in the parts that are intact and every time there are acts of love fuelled by the Spirit another part of the picture comes together, but the instability of sin and evil acts means pieces move around unhelpfully. Sadly, we can't see the picture on the outside of the box, but God can, and because of what Jesus has done for us we know there is a Kingdom of heaven where ultimately all will be made new, we will always have hope and we will know that this life is not all there is and the jigsaw puzzle will be complete in the eternal place where all tears will be wiped away.

We rightly state, before all else, that our home is in heaven, where order is restored. That is our hope. We are people of body, mind and Spirit.

Simultaneously, we rightly despair at the situation in Ukraine, we cry out to God, the glib answers given by some that 'God is at work in people's lives there' which is undoubtedly true and we should give thanks for the stories of his faithfulness, they do not satisfy me when looking at the injustice and terror and pain.

With both, in tension, it is possible to know Jesus and love God my Father and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit interceding with me – with groans too deep for words. Whilst saying, 'I don't get it' -just like the psalmists did. In fact, it's very important to say that to those who may challenge us, because we no more have the answers than all the Christians for centuries before us.

Let's explore a little more by looking at the nature of evil.

First, natural evil, this is where there is suffering from natural disasters such as a volcanic eruption, for which humans are not usually directly responsible.

Second, moral evil, where there is suffering for which people are directly responsible: acts of hate, violence and war.

Moral and Natural Evil are sometimes connected as some of our human actions such as deforestation, can cause landslides, for example.

Christchurch cathedral in New Zealand and Coventry Cathedral are powerful and poignant symbols of these two problems. Their ruined buildings, one a result of an earthquake, one a result of bombing during World War 2 show a mixed picture of beauty and destruction. Next to Coventry is a new Cathedral. Worship continues on these sites in a defiant stand against evil and the pieces of the puzzle come back together.

Today we concentrate mainly on Moral Evil.

St Augustine argued that God did not create evil, but that human beings' exercise of free will brought evil into being.

The creation of a world where free will exists contains, by necessity, the possibility of evil. In Genesis 1 God created the world and, 'God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good' Creation is described as very good, but not perfect. It contained the possibility of evil.

Any restriction of that possibility on the part of God would negate free will.

The exercise of free will carries with it the possibility of suffering, and Leslie Weatherhead compares this to a parent giving a child a gift:

*“If I give my boy a pair of roller skates, I immediately make it possible for him to get a bad bump. That is a very different thing from taking him by the neck and banging his head upon the ground.”*

Essentially, evil is a lack of goodness. Moral evil is not a physical thing; it is a lack or privation of a good thing. As Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland has noted,

*“Evil is a lack of goodness. It is goodness spoiled. You can have good without evil, but you cannot have evil without good.” Or as Christian apologist Greg Koukl has said, “Human freedom was used in such a way as to diminish goodness in the world, and that diminution, that lack of goodness, that is what we call evil.”*

God is love (1 John 4:8); the absence of love in a person is un-God-like and therefore evil. And an absence of love manifests itself in unloving behaviour. The same can be said concerning God’s mercy, justice, patience, etc. The lack of these godly qualities in anyone constitutes evil. That evil then manifests itself in behaviour that is unmerciful, unjust, impatient, bringing more harm into the good world that God has made.

Those who fall into evil behaviour usually start slowly. Paul shows the tragic progression into more and more evil in Romans 1. It starts with refusing to glorify God or give thanks to Him (Romans 1:21), and it ends with them “filled with every kind of wickedness” (verses 28–29).

We are not wholly evil people, but if evil is the absence of good, then as each of us sins we see the consequences.

However, I am not convinced by the primitive position that suffering is caused by our own sins. Job’s friends think he is responsible for his own suffering, but God tells them that they are wrong. Likewise, in Luke 13, Jesus said of some who had suffered:

*'Do you think that the Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no! But unless you repent, you too will perish.'*

My sense of this passage is that Jesus is firm that sin does not directly cause suffering (of course there may be cases when it does), but repentance is necessary for salvation. The repentance is connected not with the incidents themselves, but with the fragility of life. It's more, see what happened to these people, 'you know not the hour' so you better get repenting!

Not all pain is bad, of course, pain warns us of danger. If you put your hand in a fire your nervous system alerts your brain to withdraw. Many a theologian along the lines of Irenaeus has said that pain is good for us in shaping our character.

Some of the greatest examples to us are people who have had hard life circumstances, for example Deborah James who received a Damehood this week for raising awareness of bowel cancer through her podcast. In my own life, I've come to rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit because nothing else helped in my darkest times... but I don't buy the argument that personal suffering is part of God's great plan to refine us. It may be a by-product, by which we receive the ministry of God in our need.

But God is not the author of evil or our suffering, nor is he absent when humans suffer.

Our Heavenly Father is the author of human freedom.

People can choose to embrace good or bad, right, or wrong, because God created us with free will.

Despite the refutation that our sins do not directly cause our suffering. We all know our sins damage others.

When looking at natural evil, we might also conclude that it is possible that our sins offend the created order. We do not understand how the cosmos works. We cannot comprehend how the spiritual and physical interact.

What we do know is that by being in a relationship with God we are given the ability to recognise evil. By becoming more like him and by sharing in his creative work and becoming in one mind, we can instinctively realise that specific actions are simply wrong.

Wrong not because the actions offend socially constructed moral norms or violate laws. Wrong because the actions are alien to a universal order imprinted on Creation by the Creator.

If there was no God, Peter Berger asks: How could we say war is wrong? Nonbelievers suppose there is no faith and thus no transcendent order by which we can evaluate our acts. With that mindset, would it not be possible to argue that war is merely another example of "survival of the fittest," the principle which rules the animal kingdom?

There may be some of you who baulk at this idea- that somehow religious people know right from wrong better than others. But as we established last week when talking about other religions, God has revealed himself in creation, and through his revelation of himself in our world that is where our moral compass comes from.

On top of this, Jesus teaches us kingdom values, which are different to those of the world's call for individualism and wealth. The first are last, and the last first. The lion and the lamb will be together.

At the moment the lion would kill the lamb and the bombed cathedral is in ruin, but when we love our enemies and the beautiful praises of God along with the laments of the heart are still said and sung in those places, we see the rebuilding of a better community- a better world until eternity when all will be made new.

In the meantime, when we do not have the answer to the bigger questions, we continue to cry out to God, but also take seriously that we need to become more like Jesus, so that our evil – the places in our lives where God is absent, where love is absent, are healed and restored.

We don't know the consequences of our sin, but we know that it offends God's creative order, but neither do we know how our expressions of love enrich our wider world- by the grace of God let's build the puzzle rather than destroy it.

Isaiah 58:12

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

And let's pray – praise and lament. For God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.