

hand, scratching at the sores that cover his body. He is a miserable, pitiful sight. What is worse however is that his suffering goes much further than this. If we had read the previous, first, chapter of Job we would have found that he has already had everything taken from him – oxen, donkeys, sheep, shepherds, camels, camel tenders. They've all gone due to one calamity after another. And finally a messenger comes to tell him that his children have perished too, destroyed when a whirlwind collapsed the house they were in. And now he sits among the ashes and he hasn't much left to lose.

It could be said to be the Achilles heel of the Christian faith. Why does God allow it? Why, if God is good, and all powerful, does God permit suffering and such terrible things to happen? Look at the desperate faces of the refugees fleeing the horrors of Syria and if our faith means anything then surely we find ourselves asking, 'God, why?' Look at the pitiful body of a little three year old face down in the tide and again, as believers, do we not find ourselves asking, 'why? Why do you allow this?'

We come up against the problem too when we look out at nature, nature magnificent and awesome, and yet nature cruel and savage and bloodied. Think of Charles Darwin who, like Job, lost a beloved child - and his faith never recovered. But Darwin was also led to question the goodness of God by observing nature and specifically the habits of one particular kind of wasp which lays its eggs in a certain kind of grub, and as the larvae develop within the grub they devour its internal organs, prolonging the agony by leaving the most vital ones for last. Apparently that one got to Darwin, though it's fairly typical of nature. And we wonder: why does it have to be like this? And that's before we get onto suffering humanity

I'm reminded of C S Lewis, who wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain* which tried to explain it all theologically and rationally. And it may have satisfied some but it didn't satisfy him when his own wife died of cancer and suffering ceased to be an academic puzzle seeking a rational answer and became a cry of anguish torn from the depths of his soul. Simplistic answers melt in the furnace of experience, and perhaps we feel a bit like Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous work, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan is addressing his younger brother Alyosha who is committing his life to God as a monk, and Ivan challenges Alyosha with the cruelties and barbarities of the world that he has experienced – sickening atrocities that are as common today as ever they were. And he refers to people's attempts to make sense of such things, attempts to harmonise such a world with God. But Ivan will have none of it. He wants out. As he says, 'And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man, I am bound to give it back as soon as possible... It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.' In other words if those are the rules of the game so be it. Just don't ask me to play it.

But as Christians we don't want to hand back our ticket. We don't want to opt out of our faith. We want to try to hang on in there and so the question comes back again and again to haunt us, 'why?'

Well, I want to start by suggesting that it's the wrong question. I'm not saying there isn't some value in probing it, that we can't get deeper insights, but I don't believe that we will ever get a satisfactory answer. Certainly these early chapters of Job give no adequate answer, any more than the later ones do. In the first two

Job for here lies no satisfactory answer. No - what I think we need to take from this glimpse of the courts of heaven that the Book of Job gives us is rather the realisation that if there is a reason for the scandal of suffering then it is far beyond us. If there is a reason it's locked away in heaven, and we are as oblivious to it as Job was to this bet between God and Satan, his Prosecutor.

So if the right response to the problem of suffering is not to ask why, what is it? How should we respond? What should we do? And here I think it's helpful to look at Job's response and to reflect on that. And the first thing that strikes me about Job is his extraordinary patience and composure. Listen again to his reply to his wife, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' And then we read, 'In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.' Well, that's Job's response here and it shows remarkable faith. And maybe we're capable of that up to a point, but I am glad to say that if we were to read on Job does not maintain such extraordinary acceptance of his plight. Later on he is far from ready to accept the bad from God exactly as he accepts the good. Indeed while here in this chapter Job resists Mrs Job's advice to curse God and die, later on he comes very close to doing that. Later on he rebels and shakes his fist at God and at times he sails very close to the wind of blasphemy. And maybe that's what saves him. The writer Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor, makes a fascinating observation about Job: 'did he ever lose his faith?' asks Wiesel. 'If so, he rediscovered it within his rebellion'. I love that. Maybe it was not Job's passive acceptance but his later defiant rebellion that finally saved his faith – and indeed I suspect that is true of Wiesel himself who seems to have retrieved some sort of faith out of his

might just add as an aside: I always recall something someone said to me about the old saying that time heals. That's one of these little sayings that we trot out in response to suffering, isn't it? Time heals. Well this person said, 'no, it's not time, that heals, it's what we do with it.' And that's true. It's what we do in response to suffering that counts.

And that leads me to a second point. Why is Job such a solitary figure in this narrative? Yes, there is Mrs Job, and friends will soon appear, none of whom are helpful – but where is his support now? What is anybody actually doing about Job's suffering? He is so alone. C.S Lewis in his harrowing account of his own bereavement after his wife's death wrote, "There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me... I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me." There is so much in that: the sense of alienation and the longing for company and yet not to be talked at – just for someone to be there with him. And here surely we are reminded of one of the most astounding images of God that the Bible provides us with – an image to return to again as we wrestle with the problem of pain and that is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, on his way to the cross, anguishing over the suffering he is to face. Here as Christians we believe that we see God – God, not detached and aloof but God immersed in the hell and darkness of the world, God present in the suffering. And what does Jesus ask for? What does God in Jesus yearn for? He longs for company. He asks his close disciples Peter, James and John to stand by him and to pray with him. Meditating on that passage the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, soon to suffer his own execution, said 'Christians stand

place where the question why?, shouted to the heavens, receives only a hollow echo. It's when we ask not why but how we might respond, what we can do about it that we might begin to sense a presence we can trust. Amen.

See below for prayers of approach and intercession

we praise you whose love is stronger than death,
overcoming every barrier and every distance
between us and you.

We praise you that you are our God,
for we are a faithless and fickle people.
Sometimes that is because we do not love you
and we do not love one another;
and sometimes it is because our faith runs out;
sometimes it is because our sins cry out,
but sometimes it is because we are crying out
and we don't seem to hear and answer,
and we don't understand.

And so today we come once more
confessing our sins and our failures...

Loving God we thank you for Jesus who was faithful,
faithful in obedience and faithful in the darkness of uncertainty,
when his faith was stretched to breaking point.
Draw us closer to him that he may hold us fast
in forgiveness and through every trial.
For we pray in his name. Amen

we pray for all those in whom you are to be found.

Help us to reach out to you in them.

We pray for all those who strive to alleviate suffering:

for those who research into disease,

and for hospitals and hospices and doctors and nurses.

We pray today as we do often for the Mulanje Mission Hospital

In Malawi, for medical director Ruth Shakespeare and all the staff.

May it be a beacon of light and hope in that poverty ravaged country.

And as today is World Animal Day and also, in some places,

the Feast of St Francis of Assisi,

we remember too the animal kingdom and its suffering.

We think of the annihilation of species due to human activity,

and of the terrible suffering

caused by the excesses of the meat industry.

O God teach us to be responsible stewards of your creation

And of our fellow creatures.

And God as we gather here at your table we remember

those who would gather but who cannot because

of sickness or infirmity.

O God, may they know that through your Spirit

they are one with us and part of your one family,

that wider family that extends from earth and into

your nearer presence in heaven.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.