

Therfield Chapel
A World of Evil and Suffering
How can there be a God in a place like this?
Sunday 29th March 2009

On 29th May 1982 450 men of the 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment of the British Army defeated over 1000 Argentinean soldiers defending Goose Green on the Falkland Islands

It was the first major military victory as Britain pressed home her strategy to retake the islands from Argentinean control

About five years ago I heard a man being interviewed on the radio

He was a former British Para who fought the Argentines that day at Goose Green and he was speaking about his experiences

He explained that after the Argentines had surrendered, he along with some other Paras was given the job of collecting weapons from the bodies of dead enemy soldiers

At one point he recalled how as he rolled over one dead soldier a tape fell out of his pocket

He picked it up and read the title; it was Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto in B Flat Major

And the Para – lover of classical music – placed the tape into the walkman he carried in his rucksack, sat down and listened to the music

This is what it would have sounded like

Play music

As the former soldier related these events on Radio 4 he said something like this:

“Here I was sitting on what only an hour ago had been a battlefield where human beings were doing their hardest to slaughter each other. I sat among dead bodies and bits of bodies blown apart by artillery and mortars with the smell of cordite filling my nostrils and I listened to some of the most beautiful sounds ever penned by Man and the world seemed such a strange place”

“How could it be that a race [the human race] that could stoop to such savagery could also create such beauty?...And how could it be possible that I could share the same taste in music with a man who only a few hours ago I had been trying to kill and who was trying to kill me... and who in the end was killed by one of my mates?”

Listening to this man talking on the radio reminded me that we live in a strange world...a world of contradictions

There's something about this world that doesn't fit – it's a bizarre world

It's a world of natural beauty, of beautiful music and art and creativity and tasty food

A world of joy and laughter and fun

A world with the potential for deep and profound relationships

At its best life is rich, meaningful and deeply satisfying

But that's only one side of the coin

If we turn the coin over we see a world full of pain and suffering and evil

Like the man who fought at Goose Green, it's hard to believe that it's the same world sometimes

Last week began on Sunday with the death from cancer of Jade Goodie at the age of 27

Her death robs two small boys aged just 4 and 5 of their mother

Each year in England and Wales on average 79 children¹ are killed at the hands of their parents – the very people who are supposed to love them and give them protection and security

Since August last years over 4000 people have died in Zimbabwe of cholera – a completely preventable disease

During the last three years between a half and one million people have died of famine and war in the Sudan

In 2004 a Tsunami struck the coasts of the Indian Ocean killing 250,000 people in minutes

And so we could go on – blood and pain on every page of history

Staggering beatify side by side with appalling ugliness

Goodness side by side with terrible evil

Kindness side by side with mindless cruelty

And as we look at the second side of the coin we're tempted to ask the question, where is God in this world?

Many people have asked just such a question

¹ NSPCC Website

My late auntie Margaret – my mother’s sister - professed a strong Christian faith in here twenties – that was before she became a children’s nurse

She once said to me that she stopped believing in God as she watched a little boy slowly wither and die of leukaemia

She said, “It was then that I realised that there wasn’t a God...or worse, if there was, that He was cold and indifferent and didn’t care about the suffering of His creatures... I couldn’t submit my life to a God like that”

Now tonight I want to see if we can make any sense of this world that we live in; to ask if we can find any answers to what CS Lewis called the problem of pain

But right at the start let me explain two things that I won’t be doing tonight

First, although I may touch on it, I’m not going to look at the place of suffering in the life of the Christian

That’s a big topic in itself and I will tackle it another time

The second thing I won’t be doing is to suggest that I have all the answers to the issues of suffering and evil - I don’t – and anyone who thinks they do is deluded

What I want to attempt tonight is far more manageable

All I want to do is to offer you a few pieces of a jigsaw (5 there are more) – with each piece giving part of the whole picture

One piece of the jigsaw standing alone is inadequate to explain things but hopefully when we put them all together we’ll see something that at least makes some sense

For if we don’t have a worldview that leaves room for suffering in our lives or the lives of those we love – or perhaps we only have the idea that God exists to make us happy and joyful – we’re likely to stop believing in Him when the wheels come off our world as they do sometimes

Finally, one other bit of advice before we start assembling our jigsaw – it’s a topic requiring cool heads - this is an area where primarily we need to use our reason rather than our emotions

So let me give you some pieces of my jigsaw

Jigsaw Piece 1: Let God be God

Now the first piece – and I think the centre piece - of the jigsaw is Let God be God

This piece is not really an explanation for suffering; what is really is a call for much needed humility

It's very easy for us to sit and pontificate and mouth-off about the world that we live in thinking that we know how this world should work and that if we were to run it we could do a better job than God

I want to argue that sometimes we need to back off and realise what a small perspective we really have

Now I know that such thinking runs completely contrary to much of today's thinking

I know that deep in our contemporary worldview is the right to protest if we don't like something – to sit in judgement over anyone's actions – even God's - and decide for ourselves whether it is right or wrong

Sometime I sense when listening to people talk, that they will only consider submitting to God or even accept His existence if He meets their personal approval

They will give him the thumbs up *only* if He's the kind of God that's in keeping with how they think God should be

At times we're all outraged at the world we live in – its injustice and the suffering we find in it – me included

But when I'm scandalised by the world – I'm often drawn back to the encounter that Job had with God back there in the Old Testament

You may remember that for 35 Chapters Job and his friends philosophise and pontificate about how the world works – about what's really going on – about whether certain things are just or unjust

And for all that time God is silent

And then eventually in Chapter 38 God breaks His silence and speaks

And by the time He's finished Job is speechless

God starts by saying to Job:

² "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"

³ Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.

⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! (God's being sarcastic)
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

⁶ On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone-

⁷ while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels ^[a] shouted for joy?

⁸ "Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
⁹ when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,

And on and on God goes

So we find God asking Job question after question that he was incapable of answering

Each question humbled Job – each one was a reminder of how little he really knew

Each one was a reminder that God was God and that Job was a man – each one a cue to Job to get back into line; a polite, “Who are you?” ...“Just who do you think you are;?”; “Do you really think that you know better than the one who made all this?”

And sometimes we need to subject ourselves to the reality check that Job was put through before we sit in judgment over God and His world

Sometimes, like Job we all need to remember who we are and our status – just here for a few years on this planet and then gone

But the point I want to make is that we always need to keep in mind that God our Creator is infinitely better placed than we are to be in a position to run the world

Our perspective is simply too small to be much use in the great scheme of things

We need to keep in mind that we are not God and can never have the perspective that He has on what is finally best for the world and eternity

We can't see the end from the beginning

And at times we too would be wise to keep silent

We need to remember that God has a plan

He has a plan about how He's going to bring about a world of fairness and peace and justice

A world without terrorism and theft and child abuse and war,

A world without cemeteries and locked doors and bullying and bitterness and hatred

He has a plan - it's all recorded in the Bible

And we need to trust Him to implement that plan – He hasn't finished it yet – it is still a work in progress

And I expect that one day we will all stand up and applaud Him

Let me give you a shocking example to make a point

Lots of people say, “Why didn’t God stop Hitler?”

And it’s a fair question to ask

But it’s perfectly logical to say in response, “Perhaps he has stopped a thousand Hitlers over the centuries”

Here’s the shocking bit

Next time we read in the paper that two children have been killed in a car crash on the notorious A14, perhaps God has just stopped a future Hitler from reaching adulthood

Shocking isn’t it, but possible

The point is that we really don’t know - and not knowing is the normal position for us limited human beings about most things to do with the future and the destiny of the world

Perhaps, in that car crash - just perhaps - God is answering our prayers that we “be delivered from evil” as we say in the Lord’s Prayer

In an age where it is fashionable to sit in moral judgement over God – and wax lyrical about whether we like His ways of running the world, we would do well to remember the words of the apostle Paul who wrote:

“But who are you, O man to talk back to God?”²

So that’s jigsaw piece number 1: Let God be God

Remember the smallness of our perspective and let Him finish His plan

It’s the a big piece of the puzzle – let’s set it up there

Jigsaw Piece 2: The problem with asking the question at all

As we’ve already seen, lots of people suggest that the existence of suffering and evil calls into question the existence of God – or perhaps the existence of a good God

But in doing so these people themselves face a big problem and that problem is why are they bothered about suffering and evil at all?

Let me explain what I mean

² Romans 9:20

On 12 February 2009 we celebrated the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth – 200 years

I confess that I personally got a little irritated by some of the coverage of the event by the media

Darwin didn't propose the theory of evolution; what he did was to suggest a mechanism as to how evolution could have occurred without the need for a Creator

Evolution by chance; by natural causes rather than supernatural causes

And his suggestion was the survival of the fittest

And many people today believe him and have taken up his theory as proof that rather than the world being the product of a wise and thoughtful Creator, it is actually an accident – just here by chance

But if that is true – that the world is an accident and evolution is explained natural selection - why do we care about suffering at all?

Why are we even bothering to ask the question

For in Darwin's accidental world wouldn't we expect:

The strong to destroy the weak?

That big fish would eat small fish?

That tall trees would exclude the light from small ones so that they die?

That majority races would oppress and eliminate minority ones?

That men would use and abuse women?

If Darwin was correct – and most people believe him – we would expect all these things – they are just how human beings behave – the consequence of natural selection – the survival of the fittest

If we're consistent with this prevailing worldview, how can we blame anyone for let's say the Holocaust – there are simply no moral issues involved – what we saw was just human beings behaving as they're wired

That's just evolution in action – the fit Nazis survive and the weak Jews go under – in fact that's how we progress to higher forms of life

But if this version of reality is true (and it's the logical outcome of today's thinking), we have to account for why are we so morally outraged at evil

For if there is no God – no final right and wrong – then everything is permitted³ – because finally there's no one to deny permission

Do you see that if you take God out of the equation, the problem of suffering doesn't go away?

All that happens is that it becomes very difficult to define suffering at all

The reality is that in our deep sense of outrage at evil we are actually pointing to the existence of a moral order that was put there by God

So that's jigsaw piece number 2:

This point of this piece is not an attempt to explain suffering

No, but it's worth putting in our puzzle because the point is that the very existence of our outrage at suffering - rather than making God's existence less likely actually makes it more likely

In other words, just asking the question about suffering points to a God who made us and who placed in us a powerful sense of right and wrong – an ability to scream at injustice

So often modern objections to God are based on a sense of fair play and justice; but where do such ideas come from if not from God?⁴

And what world would you rather be born into?

Darwin's world where the weak perish or a world made by a God who is a God of justice and righteousness and who will in the end ensure that evil doesn't conquer good?

Jigsaw Piece 3: This world is not as God intended it to be

The Bible constantly makes the point that this world is not as it is supposed to be

It's gone wrong; it's a shadow of God's original intention

And when we see the world around us we need to remember that

Let me construct this jigsaw piece using an illustration

Let's imagine we're on a ship⁵ – one hundred passengers and a captain up front in charge piloting the boat

Now before we set sail the captain gives all of us a set of 10 simple rules about how things go on his ship

³ Dostoevsky in Ivan Karamazov

⁴ Tim Keller, The Reason for God, p26.

⁵ I got this illustration from Pete Woodcock speaking at All Souls Church in 2004 on 9/11.

But as we sail along, we the passengers start to mutter against the captain and we decide that we don't like where he's taking us or his 10 rules

And so we have a meeting and plan a mutiny which ends in us grabbing the Captain and chucking him overboard along with his rule book

And as he falls into the icy waters we all cheer and shout, "now we're free; we can do anything we want – long live the democratic decision"

And so we take a vote for someone to pilot the ship – he has silver tongue and persuades us that he's the right man to get us to the destination we really want to go to

But the problem is that there are lots of tricky parts to the journey

We have to navigate without the old captain's expertise – the new captain can't read the stars like he could and the rocks are traitorous for anyone without experience – that's of course assuming that we know where they are

And soon fights break out as to who should lead the ship and where we should go

And things get really scary when we hit the rocks and the ship is halfway to sinking

And we begin to shout: "Do you know whose fault this is? It's the Captain's. If he was here everything would be all right"

And you know our world is a bit like that ship – much of what's wrong with this world is our fault

We the human race have rejected out Maker and His laws,

We think we can run the world our way with our laws and we wonder why there are so many problems

And so often when things go wrong it's God who gets the blame

It's also interesting to listen to how we talk about God's lack of intervention when things go wrong

We don't want God to meddle in our lives but we do want Him to stop the murderers and the rapists and the terrorists

We don't want his laws but we do want Him to turn the bullet into a banana or the bomb into a feather; or the plane on 9/11 into a harmless black bird⁶

The problem is that if we're calling for God to stop things, he has to stop you and I as well – because we too break His laws

⁶ Pete Woodcock

You see we need to be very careful when we call for justice – because justice will apply to us as well – we all without exception stand accused of contributing to the sorry state of this world through our gossiping and our lies and our tax fiddles and our malicious words and our self promotions

So that's the third piece of the jigsaw

This world has gone badly wrong because we corporately as a race have rejected our Maker and have sought to live without Him

God never intended it to be this way and so we shouldn't be surprised that things are not as they should

They are as we might expect with the Captain and his rules overboard

We live in a world that is fundamentally flawed⁷ and much of it is our fault

God didn't create the world as we see it - this world is broken and decaying

Rather than it being shaped by God it is shaped by selfishness and greed

And so we will never create heaven on earth without God's intervention – even though we try with all our strength

Jigsaw Piece 4: suffering may not all be pointless

A few years ago I heard about the results of an European Union report on pain

It was an investigation into just how many people in the EU suffer from pain and what medical science could do about the problem

And what I picked up listening to the news was the whole tone of the report – that pain in all its forms was a scandal – an outrage – a disgrace

Never for a second did it even hint at the idea that pain could have a purpose

This kind of reasoning is often linked to God

For if God were good He would never allow any of His creatures to suffer pain – and since suffering exists either God isn't there or He isn't good – my auntie's view

Or to put it another way, God can't be loving if He allows suffering

But such reasoning simply doesn't follow

Now I don't want to minimise the effects of suffering and pain experienced by anyone

But just because suffering seems pointless to me doesn't mean that it is pointless⁸

⁷ Pete Woodcock *ibid.*

There may be many reasons for suffering that are inaccessible to our minds – and some that are accessible

Let me suggest a few

As people living in a fallen world we're all prone to self-sufficiency and an arrogant confidence in our abilities

In fact I suspect that much of the anger that is felt about suffering is simply due to the fact that pain spoils our ability to live lives our way and according to our pleasures

We want a pain free world to live life on our terms – not so that we can have confidence to believe in God and serve Him better

In the Western World we have such a strong tendency towards self-centredness and comfort that we can miss the point of what life is all about

The village of Therfield is a perfect case in point

But such a life is an illusion

Not only is there no final security in this life but the most tragic kind of life of all is one that ignores its Creator and never comes to into relationship with Him

And one of the tools that God uses to break us out of our little self-created bumbles is suffering – and it's for our own good

In those famous words of CS Lewis: "Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks in our conscience but He shouts in our pain. It's His megaphone to rouse a dead world"

Let me give you one example from the New Testament

In Luke 13 we find an account of Jesus talking to some people about a tower falling down killing eighteen people

It could be 9/11 – the attack on the Twin Towers but on a smaller scale

And Jesus asks the question: "Do you think that they [the people who died] were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish"

Jesus is making the point that tragedies should be seen as a warning and should lead us to repentance – it's as if he cautions us against seeing them only as an occasion to philosophize about their cause

⁸ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, p23.

If fact the word that Jesus uses here for perish is very strong – it means to be completely ruined and lost

And so the lesson we need to draw is that when we see earthquakes and tsunamis and terrorist outrages and credit crunches and countless other things

They're a reminder that life is brief and fragile and temporary

They're a reminder that there is a life to come and unless we get right with God there's a much greater tragedy that will hit us than physical death

They're to focus our minds on bigger meanings - usually our smaller meanings evaporate when we face pain and upset

They're a reminder that God may be speaking to us and we better listen

Suffering focuses the mind like nothing else

It draws us away from those little meaning we create – like which brand of baked beans we prefer and whether our football team's position in the league table or whether or not our mother has phoned us this week to show she cares

If you want to understand this country that's largely where we are at present – in that bland mode

Suffering shocks us out of these little meanings that have distracted us for so long and forces us to face up to ultimate and final meanings that really matter – matters of eternity – matters of heaven and hell

Suffering weans us off the idols we find comfort in; it smashes our self-sufficiency, our smugness and complacency; it teaches us of our need for grace

Suffering prizes open the hard heart to allow the word of God to penetrate

Suffering reminds us that the aim of life is not its intensification but its transformation

Suffering fosters understanding of others and sympathy and empathy

So that's piece number 4 – suffering may not all be pointless

Jigsaw Piece 5: The suffering God

On two occasions I've been to the Far East

And on both occasions I've been into temples where there are scores of Buddhas

They lie or sit there usually legs crossed, arms folded, unmoving, lifeless, unfeeling with a smug and indifferent smile

I would find it very difficult to worship a god like that

Now one of the most common things that is heard surrounding the question of suffering is that God doesn't care

That if he exists He is safe in His nice cosy heaven, aloof and removed from His creation

I met a man a few years ago who fought in the Second World War

He said that as a child he went to Sunday School and heard all the Bible stories and believed in the God about whom they were written

But out on the Battlefield he said, "I soon discovered that God wasn't there...in fact He was irrelevant there...if He existed at all He just didn't care"

But in this man's thinking he'd overlooked the most fundamental piece of evidence that God does care and understands what we suffer - the fact that 2000 years ago God became a man and lived and died with and for His creatures

Such realities place the Lord Jesus in a category that couldn't be more different to those Buddhas that I saw in the East

Although this doesn't finally answer the question of pain it does tell us much about a God

And so when we think about the question, "Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue", the cross of Christ tells us that the answer can't be because God doesn't care...it can't be that he is indifferent and detached from our condition⁹

For God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that He was willing to take it on Himself¹⁰

It was at Calvary that God abandoned His traditional privilege of being removed and distant from His creation¹¹

For our God has come among us and knows what it is like to be human and to face the extremities of pain and rejection

God is not some remote religious commentator on the affairs of Man; no. He is intimately involved in its sufferings and tragedies¹²

This is our God, the Servant King – the King who reigns from a cross rather than a throne

Let no one ever say "God doesn't understand; God doesn't know what I am going through" He does

⁹ Tim Keller, The Reason for God p30

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Albert Camus, quoted by Tim Keller in The Reason for God p31.

¹² Pete Woodcock

He's been there

He knows what it means to be frail and weak and vulnerable

He has won the right to be our Lord and Judge

He has won the right to our allegiance and worship

Let me finish with a story:

At the end of time billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly - not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" snapped a pert brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror, beatings, torture, death!"

In another group a black man lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched for no crime but being black!!"

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes: "Why should I suffer?" she murmured, "It wasn't my fault."

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world.

How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered most. A Jew, a black man, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live one earth - as a man!

"Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

"At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

“As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

“And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No-one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.”

Jigsaw Piece 5: The suffering God