

“Suffering – any explanation?”

Rev Gregor Henderson, Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra

7 October 2012

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

One of the most thorny issues for any thoughtful person of faith is that of suffering. If God is good, loving, compassionate, how come there is suffering in the world? How come good people suffer bad things? You only have to think of tragic accidents, birth defects, terrible diseases, horrible crimes, to know that this is indeed a serious issue for those of us who believe in the unfailing goodness of God.

Primitive religions tended always to take the view that suffering is caused by the person's own sinfulness – either directly because of the wrong that a person is doing, or as punishment sent by God for the wrong a person is doing. And the corollary is that good behaviour is seen as being rewarded by God with good health and wealth and prosperity, such that someone who is healthy, wealthy and prosperous must indeed be a good person. You can see this viewpoint represented in many older parts of the Hebrew Scriptures – not least in many of the Psalms, where suffering is equated with wickedness and prosperity equated with goodness.

And despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite the obvious fact that good people suffer from diseases and troubles and accidents just as much as not-so-good people, this primitive religious view is still found in some people of faith today, among the purveyors of the so-called prosperity gospel, those who wrongly espouse the notion that true followers of Christ will automatically have abundant wealth and health and well-being. Not necessarily so.

Enter the book of Job. I have to admit that we don't give enough attention to the beautiful poetry and the solid theological argument present in the story of Job. The book of Job probably developed into its present form around 400 or 500 years before Christ, but its origins may well go back at least a thousand years earlier. Other ancient Middle Eastern civilisations had some very similar stories or legends, which predate Job by centuries. It is a well-developed majestic story about suffering, the causes of suffering and the nature of God.

Let me very quickly outline the story and the contents of Job:

- In chapter one we meet Job who is described as “blameless and upright”, faithful to God, wealthy and with a happy family. Then we are taken to the heavenly council where we meet “the Satan”, who has the role in heaven of being the accuser or the tester of human beings. God allows Satan to test Job's faith and integrity – so that in the space of one day Job's cattle, donkeys and camels are all stolen and his farm workers killed, his sheep and more farm workers were consumed by fire, and his seven sons and three daughters are all killed. Job responds with shock and grief and horror, but still worships God. His wife was not so sure!
- In chapter two God allows Satan to further test Job, this time by allowing Job to be personally afflicted, as long as his life is spared. “Loathsome sores” covered Job from head to feet, and he suffered greatly.
- Then chapters 3 through to 37 consist of heavy conversations between four of Job's friends who've come to see what has happened, and Job. The friends by and large take the view that Job must have sinned grievously for such suffering to come upon him. Job disputes that view, while not being able to explain why he is suffering so badly. He challenges the views of his friends and ends up challenging even God for allowing such terrible things to happen to him.
- In chapters 38 to 41, God then directly confronts Job, telling Job that he has no right, no business to challenge God, for he is a mere human being and God is the creator of the whole universe. Human beings do not have the capacity to understand all the

mysteries of God and God's creation, and should accept that there is much they will never understand.

- In the final chapter, 42, Job responds to God's chastising with humility, penitence and faith. God restores Job, forgives the friends for their theological errors, and reinstates Job's previous wealth and fortune and family twice over.

It's a majestic and fascinating story, told beautifully in fine Hebrew poetry.

What do we learn from it? Three main things:

1. One, that human suffering is not God's punishment upon us, not the result of our guilt or sin. Job was indeed innocent, good, a fine human being, undeserving of such grief, yet his suffering is very real.
2. Two, that we human beings cannot know and comprehend everything about God. There is mystery, there is much beyond our ken, and to live with faith in God means accepting the reality of our lack of full understanding and the reality of the mystery of God.
3. And three, that God journeys with us in our suffering, that God does not abandon us, but stays with us, communicates with us, bears us up in the midst of our suffering.

Friends, those learnings are helpful, but they do not amount to an explanation of the fact of human suffering. Job teaches us to reject the nonsense that bad things happen only to guilty people, which is indeed helpful, but we are still left with only partial understanding, partial explanation.

We are helped a little more by the gift of Jesus Christ, a few centuries after the final writing of the book of Job. Christ suffers, although he also is blameless and upright. The fact of Christ's suffering, and his victory over it through coming to life again on that first Easter Day, tells us that God fully understands human suffering, what it's like, what it costs. Jesus' miracles of healing, and his unfailing compassion, show us too that God does not want us to suffer, that God feels for us in any suffering we have to endure, and that God accompanies us through it, offering us comfort, hope, strength to help us cope. And Jesus' promise of life beyond death, with God in eternal peace and joy, tells us that suffering is not the end story, far from it..

But we have to admit it's still not a full explanation. When it comes to the question of why suffering, we are still left with mystery, uncertainty, only partial knowledge. But Job heads us in the right direction. Any suffering we have to endure is not punishment from God. And God journeys with us through any suffering we have to bear. Amen.