

Trinity 2 Matthew 10.24-39

Sooner or later as people of faith, and that includes us, we are faced with answering difficult questions about pain and suffering. Put more sharply in the current situation: how can the care demonstrated in the phrase from today's Gospel 'even the hairs of your head are all counted' square with the untimely death of more than forty thousand people in this country, and so many more world-wide? Is this a God you doesn't really care, or perhaps worse, is too weak in the face of Covid19 to care, or worse still, is somehow responsible for it? Such questions are obviously not new, but they do come into a sharp relief at this time; they go under the general title of theodicy.

Now there are a number of good rational arguments to counter such difficulties, and they may work in the abstract; but in the concrete of something like bereavement or severe physical pain, they don't cut any mustard at all. You only have to think of when you have toothache, to imagine your reaction if someone says, well-meaning no doubt, let me give you some quite complicated theology about free-will. What you need is the dentist or at least paracetamol.

It's also unsatisfactory to dismiss this airily as just another mystery, which somehow devalues the experience of the other person. And mystery is not the same as saying honestly to another, "I don't know why it's like this, I can't explain it, it must be terrible". In those last phrases you have examples of empathy, a 'being with', or even compassion, 'a suffering with'. C. S. Lewis of Narnia fame produced a slim volume, *The Problem of Pain*, which is not very satisfactory in my view. Much better after the early death of his wife Joy is *A Grief Observed*, not an explanation but a witnessing of what grief really means.

There is evidence of the same thing in our scriptures and in our theology, which may not answer those difficult questions directly, but re-frames them or re-directs them. The Psalms are a go-to place for language which addresses God in person, often in such a forthright way that our Christian piety might feel embarrassed – but honesty is their function. So classically, Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Jesus turned to these words at the moment of his crucifixion, speaking out loud words of isolation and dereliction to the God he believed he was trying to follow. So the notion of Jesus with us in our pain, of a God who suffers because of the pain of his only Son, does not take away from our difficulties but sits with them, endures them with us.

The resurrection offers a further re-framing of this human situation, perhaps especially pertinent now. The resurrected Christ shows his hands and side to the disciples. The marks of nail and spear are still there. For individuals, local communities and whole societies, the wounds of the pandemic will endure, they cannot be dismissed, they will be part of the new normal, but there can be new life. The role of the Church, following the words of Albert Schweitzer, is to be the community that bears the mark of pain, and therefore witnesses also to the resurrection.

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