

Where is God?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Isaiah 53: 4-12; Psalm 91: 9-16; Heb 5: 1-10; Mk 10: 32-45

Friends, let me tell you a story—as sad a story as I've ever heard. The American Anglican writer John Westerhoff relates this story from his days as a parish priest. Once, he was telephoned at the Rectory by a young couple from his congregation. The husband had been backing his car out of the driveway, and he hadn't seen their two-year old, who'd crawled into the way. And of course he backed right over the child, and killed it. When their priest arrived at the house the police were there, measuring and taking photos. Inside he found his parishioners lying on their bed, holding each other, sobbing their hearts out. He remembers that he felt a fool, not knowing what to say. So at last he just sat on the bed with them, and put his hands on their shoulders, and soon he found himself weeping along with them.

Quite some time later, months in fact, long after the funeral, when the force of the grief was beginning to abate, he was again talking with the parents. He confessed that he was ashamed of his behaviour on the awful day, that he felt he'd let them down. And what do you think they said? It turns out that they hadn't felt let down at all. On the contrary, they thanked their priest, reassuring him that what he'd given them was better than anything he thought a professional pastor ought to have given. And of course what he gave them—all he had to give them—was himself. But of course that was just the right thing—some genuine human solidarity in the face of life's undeniable tragedy.

Had their priest offered any sort of tidy answer, any crisp theological formula, anywhere down the line, it would've been the very worst thing he could have done. Instead, he offered through touch and his sharing of the young parents' pain a sacrament of God's presence in the midst of their horror. And this is the God we meet in Jesus Christ—according to today's passage from Hebrews, according to the faith of the Incarnation. This is a God who works in the thick of things, a God anything but remote from the 'anxious prayers and supplications', from 'the loud cries and tears' of the human journey which our epistle acknowledges today—of life at its most demanding and distressing.

Somehow or other, our salvation, our liberation, our putting right with God through Jesus Christ depends on Jesus' suffering solidarity with us. Somehow, the Christian God transforms our life and our world by bearing its burdens through the inside of things.

This is a God who sits alongside the grieving and shares the pain of their grief, like that priest in tears with the anguished young parents. This doesn't give an answer. But it does somehow help create human meaning and value in the absence of answers. I've found this as a parish priest myself, when I've had the privilege of spending time alongside the dying. I've been struck by the way dying people wanted to hold my hand, even big strong men. An embodied sign of human solidarity is more important to us at times like that than any slick answer, any theological explanation. And Jesus Christ is just that—not an answer to the mysterious paradoxes of life, not a theological theory, not a rational explanation whereby we draw a veil of order over the naked horror of existence.

And the God who shares the pain of it all also takes the blame for it all. With the God of Jesus Christ the buck stops here. A God remote from our sufferings is somehow more culpable than a God who lines up in the midst of our sufferings, a God who has to feel personally the paradox of a good creation where bad things happen. And innocent to boot—the ultimate innocent victim.

The 1960s poet Stevie Smith put it best, I think, with these words she attributes to one of the thieves crucified alongside Jesus:

You can blame it on the Romans.
You can blame it on the Jews.
You can blame it onto Herod.
It's God I accuse.
It's God they ought to crucify,
Instead of you and me,
I said to the carpenter, a-hanging on the tree.

Now, let's dwell for a moment on this carpenter, who strides ahead of us in today's Gospel: "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed him were afraid". Of course they were amazed, and afraid: they knew what was coming, and they sensed Jesus' resolute refusal to skirt it or avoid it. They were afraid at the vulnerability of God's presence, which they found in Jesus at his most compromised—by sin, by evil, by suffering. Jesus and his God took-on all of it: "they will mock him, and spit upon him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again". Jesus' resurrection is not the denial of his suffering, and it's not an escape from ours. But it is God's revelation of hope and a new beginning out of suffering. It is a reminder that suffering is not the last word. But it is not escape from suffering.

Of course there are many of Jesus' followers who fail to understand any of this, and we meet two of them in the Gospel today. Instead of sharing God's solidarity with suffering humanity, they want their seats of honour, and their experience of glory. So it is for many Christian people. They think faith means escaping from the doubts and the confusion, from the suffering and the compromise, and finding a place of complete peace, complete reassurance, complete poise, completely in control of affairs, with an answer for everything.

But Jesus is not in that business. The ones who get the seats to the right and left are the ones crucified with him. As for us, we get to share his solidarity with suffering humanity, we get to be God's embodied presence in a suffering and perplexing world, a world wonderful yet terrible.

This is God's answer to the suffering of human beings—God gives Godself to us, in the person of Jesus. And we participate in that self-giving sacramentally this morning. God's answer to a hurting world is Jesus, and through Jesus God's answer to a hurting world is the sacramental presence of Jesus—in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and in the sacramental people formed and nurtured week by week in the context of this sacrament.

In Jesus Christ, God stands with us under the conditions of our own fragility and vulnerability, and holds our hands, as it were, and calls us to share Jesus' solidarity with the pain of all creation. Here is where the disciples of Jesus need to be—not seeking a place of comfort and reassurance and certainty, like the disciples in today's Gospel passage but, rather, living in the world with all its pain and uncertainty—not offering answers, necessarily, but certainly offering ourselves.

Which is why the prophet Isaiah's image of the suffering servant is such a compelling one, from our Old Testament reading today. The Church from the beginning saw Jesus in this figure of faithful Israel, as well as its own vocation—not because Christians should be in love with suffering, but because like our God we are in love with a suffering world, and we can't be genuinely a part of that love without being a part of that suffering, without acknowledging life's regular lack of satisfying closure, so that solidarity and presence in God's name is often the best we can manage.

And I think, when it comes down to it, that people want the solidarity more than they want the closure. Which brings us back to our Eucharist today: church isn't a place where all questions are answered, and all doubts removed. Rather, the Eucharist is a place of profound divine-human solidarity. And it's a sign that hope abides: a resurrection sign, no matter what.