

## Lent 2, 2009 (March 8<sup>th</sup>) A Cry from the Heart

Linnea Good's song is a lament for the atomic age. She wrote it when the threat of nuclear war hung like a cloud over the world, and we were beginning to wake up to what we have done to the environment on which our life depends. She, and others, have looked around at the world as it really is: a world we hide from by entertaining ourselves and consuming too much and insulating ourselves inside comfortable homes with security alarms to keep out the undesireables. She looks at the world we encounter when we walk down the streets of Victoria and see someone huddled in a doorway on a cold wet night, when we travel to exotic destinations and see emaciated children begging in the streets, when we watch the news and see endless pictures of suffering and violence. We slam up against the wall of this suffering world when someone we love is diagnosed with an incurable disease, or when we are blindsided by tragic accident or deliberate harm. We are left deeply shaken, trying to make sense of it all.

*"Where are you, God? Why have you forsaken your people?"* At some point, any thinking, believing Christian asks this question – everyone who reaches out for a powerful and loving God in the midst of distress. Both Matthew and Mark's Gospels depict Jesus asking this same question as he gasped for breath on the cross: *"Eloi, eloi, lema sabacthani – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* As Christians, each of us are going to have to find a way to make peace with this question that arises from the depths of our sorrowing hearts.

Sometimes, we try to temper our doubts with affirmations about *God's will* or *not being tested beyond what we can endure*. Many find such phrases reassuring: indeed, there is much in the New Testament to reinforce these ways of dealing with suffering. Some of you might remember the reading from 1 Peter a few weeks ago: "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is right? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed...it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins, once and for all..." (3 (13-14a,17, 18 a)). The writer of 1 Peter doesn't even attempt to explain suffering – he just wants to help the early church deal with it. But there is an underlying assumption that all that happens, for good or for ill, is the will of God.

The question of *theodicy* – why an all-powerful good God allows suffering to happen – is a question that has haunted folk of faith for centuries – but perhaps never more so than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when faced with the SHOAH, which most of us probably know as the Holocaust. It was a horror that all theologians have had to grapple with – followed by another horror in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the unleashing of atomic weaponry on the world.

So I thought it might be helpful today to hear how two Jewish rabbis have dealt with the question of suffering – how they have counselled others and struggled themselves with the experience of apparent abandonment by God. This experience of innocent suffering is the rock on which many boats have foundered: many people raised in faith have had their faith broken by it. Yet Rabbi Harold Kushner and Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner have each made an attempt to help those who struggle with faith in the face of suffering. Rabbi Kushner's son died of premature aging syndrome at 14; Rabbi Kirzner lived with, and eventually died from, melanoma at a relatively young age. And each of them carries the historic memory of the Shoah in their blood and bone.

Rabbi Kushner presented his views in a famous book, *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People"*. I've talked about this, but let me give you a quick summary:

The answer Rabbi Kushner gives is that God's power is affected by the act of creating life. In creating the natural universe and human beings, God relinquished power to determine all that is and all that will be, in order to allow nature and humanity to develop freely. Instead of intervening directly in the tragedies that shape our lives, God enters into our pain, and bears it with us, as many understand that Jesus bore the pain of humanity on the cross. If our sense of justice is sometimes outraged by the pain we see and experience, where does that sense of justice come from in the first place? Kushner suggests that that sense of justice and fairness may be the truest proof of the reality of God.

In an interview with *Time* magazine, Rabbi Kushner said, "Given the unfairness that strikes so many people in life, I would rather believe in a God of limited power and unlimited love and justice, rather than the other way around. Why do we worship power? Why do we assume that total power is the most wonderful thing we could ascribe to God, even if it means compromising his fairness and his love? I believe that God is totally moral, but nature, one of God's creatures, is not moral. Nature is blind. Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, disease germs, speeding bullets, they are all equal opportunity offenders. They have no way of knowing whether it's a good person or a bad person in their path. In fact, there's a passage in the Talmud [Jewish scripture] that says that God's justice would demand that certain things not happen, but nature is not just and those things happen." Kushner sees much that happens in life as having no direction or intention from God: it is random. But he believes it is God who gives us the ability to cope with what we otherwise would not be able to, who strengthens us and comforts us. In the incredible human ability to cope and to move forward through pain and suffering, to renew and start again, Kushner sees evidence of a deeply loving God.

Rabbi Kirzner, on the other hand, is not satisfied with Kushner's answer. He writes, "What good is it to know that God shares my pain if at the same time I am told that pain is utterly without meaning and purpose? Even if I cannot know the exact meaning of my personal suffering, I can still have faith that there is some purpose to that suffering." He goes on to write, "Far more than God's sympathy, I seek His assurance that whatever is happening to me is designed to lead somewhere and that I have not simply been abandoned to blind fate."

Kirzner believes that to allow for any randomness in the world is to discount God's sovereignty and loving intention for us. He believes that the suggestion that sometimes people suffer *without* purpose can destroy the very comfort that faithful people seek when they call out to God in their distress. He argues that there is a huge difference between the experience of suffering *for a purpose*, and suffering that *has no meaning*. For example, childbirth can be extremely painful: and yet women willingly endure it because the end result is a child. To go through similar pain without purpose would be incredibly distressing.

The distinction between needless suffering and purposeful suffering is often made when we talk about Jesus' call to carry a cross. To walk the way of the cross is not to seek out or embrace purposeless suffering, but to accept the challenges we may face *because* of our faith and commitment to Jesus. Carrying the cross of Jesus means greeting the possibility of hardship with courage and a determination to move through it as Jesus did, without abandoning the way of discipleship.

Rabbi Kirzner also suggests that in our North American society, we confuse what is good with what is pleasant. He argues that much that is unpleasant and even painful, can produce good. As he puts it, "Smoking may be pleasant, but it kills. Many medicines are bitter -- some, like those used in chemotherapy, extremely so -- yet they can save lives."

He writes that our lives are designed for a purpose, and what happens to us in life, whether experienced as joy or tragedy, must eventually direct us toward God's good purpose for us. So the question to be asked is not, "How or why is this bad thing happening to me", but "how can what is happening to me be part of God's purposes for me?" How, (in the words of our mission statement) is this going to help me deepen my connection with God, with my neighbour, with my self?" Those I know who have been able to approach life's challenges in this way, have found their own lives and others' enriched by it.

Rabbi *Kushner* talks about this idea of meaningful suffering by saying that there are things in life that happen that *have no meaning* at the time. In other words, God does not *cause* them in order to teach us or others; they just happen. But, he says, we can *give* them meaning by how we respond to them. He quotes Dorothy Soelle in her book *Suffering*: “the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve God or the devil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed? Not “where does the tragedy come from?’ [which is an unanswerable question] but ‘where does it lead?’” (p.141 *When Bad Things*)

Both Kushner and Kirzner have much more to say, and I cannot present all their ideas in one sermon. Nor do they answer all of the questions we might ask: about large-scale suffering, about human accountability, about evil and how it acts in the world. There are questions that simply cannot be answered fully; but I think it’s important to explore these issues all the same. There is no such thing as a life without sorrow or suffering, and if we do not wrestle with this in our faith communities, then our worship will not reflect the realities of our lives.

There are preachers who claim that to follow Jesus is to know only boundless joy and prosperity; but Jesus himself said quite the opposite. In fact, he *rebuked* Peter for telling him he musn’t walk the path of suffering he saw ahead of him. Jesus knew that his actions would have inevitable consequences, but he chose to stay the course, even though it cost him his life. His trust was like the trust of the Psalmist, and like the conclusions of both Kushner and Kirzner in their different ways: that in the end, where we go, whatever we go through, we go through it with God, and God is able to bring good from out of the tragedy and pain. God will hold, God will help, God will heal. The God of resurrection will bring new life out of tragedy and despair: this we believe. This we trust. Like the Psalmist, we can move from absolute despair, into an expression of confidence in God’s unfailing love.

There was a reason I chose to use that song by Linnea Good. In the repetition of that heartfelt cry, “Why, my God, have you forsaken me?” the question changes, and at the very end of the song becomes “Have you forsaken me?” And the answer, we will find, if we place our trust in God, is “No, Never.” To quote the Psalmist, “For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.”

One final note, and it comes from an unlikely source: a fantasy novel called *Divided Allegiance* by Elizabeth Moon. In it, the heroine, Paskenarrion, is being asked to join an order of knights who owe their allegiance to a Saint, named Gird,

who is supposed to have the ability to exercise divine power to heal, to protect the helpless, to bring comfort where it is needed. Paks is not so sure she can commit to this Fellowship of Gird: after all, Gird did not keep innocent children from dying, or her friends from being killed by bandits, even though one of them was a devout follower of Gird. She's not sure if she trusts either Gird's power, or Gird's benevolence. The head of the order says to her: " So you are not rejecting [Gird]'s principles, it seems, but the fact that they aren't carried out....Then it seems, Paksenarrion, that you ought to be willing to try to carry them out."

There is much suffering in this world over which we have no power – over which we can only cry out our lament to God. But there is much suffering over which we DO have power. Perhaps the best response to our own suffering and to the suffering of those we love, is to alleviate the suffering of another. In this, our suffering acquires meaning, and we truly walk in the footsteps of our healing, redeeming, self-giving Saviour. Amen.