

The Problem Of Evil

Plain Christianity — A Word to the Wayfarer.

By Father Michael Scott, S.J.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1191 (1954)

I suppose that one of the problems which will continue to engage men's minds and trouble their hearts till the end of time has come, is the age-old Problem of Evil. People are worried about it, and unhappy — and quite understandably so, because it is a problem and a very difficult one.

THE PROBLEM STATED.

The problem might best be put something like this: — There is a God, Who we are told, is good and loving and all powerful.

There is also much dreadful suffering and unhappiness in this world. If God can prevent this suffering and does not, then He is not good and loving, but cruel or at best indifferent.

If He cannot prevent it, then He is not all-powerful. In either case, He is not what He is made out to be. And if it is insisted that He is still good and loving and all-powerful, why does He permit all this suffering and unhappiness?

That is the problem, and admittedly, it is a rather frightening one. How are we going to solve it? Can we solve it?

IS THERE AN ANSWER?

Frankly no — that is, not completely. And in our present state of life, we should not even expect to have a complete solution. Because to have such a solution we would need to know God's mind, and we cannot do that in this life. For the mind of God is infinite, without limit, whereas our minds are very finite, very limited, and therefore can only grasp what is itself finite and limited. You cannot pour an ocean into a tumbler, and you can't take the mind of God and, as it were, pour it into the mind of man.

So then, not knowing God's mind completely, we can't expect to know fully why He permits pain and suffering. But does it follow from that, because we do not know God's mind in all this — does it follow that He is necessarily cruel or indifferent? Can't we attribute to Him, in His actions, motives at least as high and worthy as we attribute to our fellow men in similar circumstances?

A father, for example, punishes his child, a doctor or a dentist causes suffering to his patients by an operation or some painful form of treatment — 'they stick needles into us' and do 'all sorts of terrible things' — but do we, on that account, consider them cruel or indifferent to suffering? Why then, when we refer pain and suffering a step further — back to God — why should we immediately conclude that He is cruel or indifferent? Only purposeless suffering offends our moral sense, and as far as God is concerned we have no right to say, 'that any suffering is purposeless'.

GIVING GOD CREDIT.

We give the father, the doctor, the dentist credit for their high motives — ‘they are cruel only to be kind’, they hurt only to heal and correct. Why then should we stop short at God and refuse to credit Him with like high motives.

It’s so inconsistent, really, so illogical, so stupid when one stops to think about it. After all, if we can feel this way about pain and suffering, and act this way about them, and know that it is right, then why does it suddenly become wrong when applied to God, and what right have we to suppose that God doesn’t feel and act about them that way too? After all, where do we get these feelings from, this wisdom of purposeful permission of pain, if not from God? Because — if God is to be made responsible for the pain and suffering in this world, simply because it is His world, then logically He must also be responsible for the good. And, as we shall see, it is the good for which He is responsible that explains the evil which He permits.

ONLY ONE SOLUTION.

To assume that He is cruel or indifferent will not help us solve our problem — on the contrary, it leaves us with an even greater one, the problem of good. To assume that He is not all-powerful will not help us, as there is then no logical explanation at all for this world and its happenings, as we know them.

And therefore, the only solution must be that He is both all-loving and all-powerful and that He permits evil, pain and suffering precisely for our good.

We start off then by assuming that God does really love us, and then see if we can reconcile the pains and sufferings of this world with that love of God. We are entitled to make that assumption, surely, for it is not an arbitrary one, but an inescapable logical conclusion from everything else in the world outside evil.

GOD DOES LOVE US.

It is proved first by everything that is good and happy in our lives, and no one but the most jaundiced will deny that the balance is overwhelmingly on the side of goodness and happiness. And if it sometimes appears otherwise, isn’t that only because ugliness strikes the eye as glaring and exceptional, whereas goodness and beauty are natural and ordinary?

And even if this were not so, even if there were no apparent happiness in this world, but only pain and suffering, we would still have the greatest and most staggering proof of all that God was not indifferent to our sufferings but that He loved us to the point beyond which even love cannot go, in the fact that He Himself became man like us and after a life of work and suffering died as a criminal on the cross that He might save us from the consequences of sin.

— ‘Greater love than this no man has than a man lay down his life for his friends.’ It is the supreme test, isn’t it, and we cannot ask any more. And incidentally, it is His own saying. Will He then, Who loves us so much, will He allow anything to ‘touch us’ that is not for our good? Can we not trust Him then; has He not earned that trust?

At least let us not judge Him. For a true judgment of anything, we must know all the facts and here in this matter, we simply do not know them. For us to attempt to judge Him, then, would be not only an act of unreason, but an act of gross impertinence.

STARTING POINT.

So, as a start, as a foundation on which to build, and a safe base to which to return when we can see no other defence, let this be our attitude: — God permits pain and suffering — we do not always see why. But we do know that He loves us. Therefore, we know that if He permits pain and suffering it must be for our good.

I said a moment ago that it is impossible for us in this life ever to understand fully God's motives in this matter because it is impossible for us to grasp the infinite mind of God. But can we perhaps understand Him partly — catch brief glimpses as it were of some of the motives which prompt Him to permit pain and suffering? I think we can, and for the remainder of this talk I would like to put to you what seem to me very good reasons for God's permitting of them.

SIN AND FREE WILL.

Take first of all, the question of moral evil — sin, wrongdoing. Why does God permit it? The answer to that lies in another question — is liberty a good thing or isn't it?

What do we prize most in this world? What is it that forever we are assuring ourselves and the rest of the world, we are prepared to fight for even unto death? Isn't it liberty, isn't it freedom? Was any war ever fought in which that motive wasn't predominant on one side or the other?

Well, God made us free, and would have from us a service that is free. But in practice, here on earth, freedom to serve God means also freedom to refuse that service — in other words it means sin, or at least it implies its possibility.

Hence, given free will, sin or at least its possibility is a normal necessary consequence; otherwise, that freedom would be a mockery.

It is true that God if He wanted to, could force us to obey His will. But if He did that He would be completely nullifying His gift of free will, and the whole beauty and value of man's service would be lost because only by its being free can man really show his love for God and his neighbour, only by its being difficult can he really show his worth. Here it might be argued that although freedom is a precious gift to those who use it rightly, it is a tragedy and perhaps even a final tragedy to those who are too weak to use it properly or so perverse that they misuse it, and therefore God should not have given it to them, which means of course that He should not have created them.

The answer to that is that if God had refrained from creating certain people because He foresaw they would abuse their freedom, He would have been dictated to by His creatures, therefore dependent on them, therefore no longer God.

But leaving that aside, because it is a difficult piece of metaphysical reasoning, to follow it right through and looking at it from a purely human angle, don't we all agree that freedom of its very nature always involves a risk and that that risk is justifiable if the freedom is for the common good?

ABUSE OF FREE WILL.

Let me illustrate that with an example I found once in a book by the late Archbishop Downey. Supposing an employer had decided to give a bonus of £10 to each of his employees, and suppose furthermore that he knew that one of his employees, whom we shall call X, would mispend the money on drink. Well, he gives the £10 to all of them, including X, because X was one of his employees — and sure enough X does spend it all on drink, has a riotous week-end, fails to report back to work on the Monday, and is dismissed. Whose fault is it?

Is it the employer's, because he gave X a good gift which could have been put to so many good uses? Surely, the guilt rests entirely with X who abused the gift.

Similarly with the gift of free will, which God gives us — if we misuse it, God is no more responsible than the employer in the example I have given — but only ourselves. After all, it is free will we are talking about, and if we abuse it, then the blame is entirely ours, particularly when we remember that all the time God is helping us to use it rightly by the never-ceasing action of His grace, Sanctifying and Actual.

SIN AND SUFFERING.

Let's turn now to physical evil — pain and suffering — and to begin with let's take the most obvious and intense suffering we see in this world — the ravages of war and its dreadful aftermath.

People say — you've heard them so often yourselves — “If God loved men there wouldn't be any war”. An understandable complaint, perhaps, at first hearing, and made without bitterness mostly — but in reality so blindly and stupidly unfair. For it is not God who causes war, not God who drops bombs and brings death and destruction to millions of innocent people, but man himself, man gone wrong by disobeying the greatest of all God's human commandments — “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

For, if man obeyed that commandment there would never be any question of war. And so the complaint should really read, not — ‘if God loved men there wouldn't be any war’, but rather — ‘if men loved God and obeyed His commandment to love their fellow men there would not be, never could be a war.’

MUCH SUFFERING IS MAN-MADE.

And here we come to the crux of this problem of human pain and suffering, that so much of it is directly man-made, the direct result of man's disobedience to God.

For sin necessarily involves the violation of some human right (at any rate sins against the last seven of the Ten Commandments) and the violation of a human right brings suffering in its train — mental or physical.

Hence, granted the possibility of sin, the possibility of human pain and suffering is another necessary consequence.

We can't have it both ways — we can't be free and at the same time avoid the consequences of that freedom.

So let's not blame God, if seeing that a free and willing service is best, and creating us free, He allows us at the same time to suffer the consequences of that freedom, in sin and in the pain and suffering that are its by-product, He could not do otherwise in the present dispensation of His providence.

In fact, if He did prevent those consequences He would be doing something that is not for our ultimate good. Because sin disturbs the balance of creation, and suffering as a counter-balance and a sanction is necessary to restore it.

SIN AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE.

But — and this is where God’s never-ceasing love and providence come in — all the time, without stifling and nullifying this free will — God is working on the human soul with all the powers of His moral influence to draw it away from sin — by revelation, by the example of His own life as man, by encouragement, by physical sanctions, by the invisible force of His grace. And if He fails there sometimes — as fail He must when He leaves it to man’s free will ultimately whether he is to obey — if He fails there, loving us still in spite of our disobedience, He then takes those necessary consequences of sin, which are pain and suffering, and uses them to draw out untold good.

People either do not see that, or they deliberately ignore it, but in the long run, it will be seen that no suffering was ever wasted, but that God drew out of it, blessings that far and away counter-balance the original evil.

That is God’s way. He lets men sin because He would have their service a free one — He lets necessary physical consequences of pain and suffering ensue, and then sets in to repair the damage done, working, as Saint Paul tells us, — “all things together unto good.”

What a loving and patient Father we have in our God.

SICKNESS AND TRIALS — THEIR VALUE.

And now let’s look at pain and suffering that are not so obviously the direct result of man’s sin, but appear to come more directly from the hand of God Himself. I refer to trials like ordinary sickness and pain, the various sorrows and disappointments we experience in this life, and then the more obvious ones usually referred to legally as — ‘Acts of God’ — like plagues, and storms and earthquakes, famine, floods and droughts.

Why does God send them, or at any rate why does He allow them?

Well, first of all, they may be sent as a corrective punishment for sin — a sanction. I say guardedly ‘may’, because we really have no way of knowing in any individual case. But if it is that way, surely no one can question the justice of it? We have offended God, and to correct the balance we must be punished — either here or hereafter. And if God sees fit to correct us now through suffering, then surely there is no cause for complaint, but if we see it properly, only gratitude, that it comes now when we can best profit from it, for ourselves and for others.

THIS LIFE A TRIAL FOR ETERNITY.

But leaving all that aside, leaving aside the possibility of its being sent as a sanction for sin — much more frequently and more importantly, therefore, we can be sure it is sent as a trial.

This life is not an end in itself, it is meant merely as a trial, a test of our fitness to see whether we are worthy of our final end, which is to see and enjoy God forever in Heaven.

Now what sort of a test would it be if there were no pain and suffering in this world, no hardship, no sorrow, no unhappiness, and our life here were just one, long, unbroken round of happiness and of pleasure? It would be a mockery, wouldn’t it, not worthy of the name of trial?

And what value would we place on that next life with God, in fact would we even want it, if this one were so easy and that other to be won simply by drifting along pleasantly in this?

We just don’t value the things that are ours for the asking and we have little or no respect for the man who has never had to fight for the things that he calls his own. The real prizes of life are those

that are hardest to win, and the real heroes of this world those who have fought and suffered and won through at last to victory in the hard and difficult way.

Would we have it otherwise with the greatest prize of all, and the greatest victory, the winning of Heaven?

SUFFERING A BREEDING GROUND FOR VIRTUE.

And what are the virtues we prize most in men in the purely natural order? Courage and strength and patience, surely, and sympathy and kindness and understanding? And where will you find a better breeding-ground for those than in hardship and in suffering? In fact, what other breeding-ground is there?

How is the fine, tough, resilient steel of a Toledo blade forged but by tempering, being tried by heat and cold, being hammered and bent and twisted? Even so is character wrought in men. Look around you among your own friends and those whose character you admire and ask yourselves where those qualities have come from that make them what they are. You will find, I think, that they have their roots in pain and struggle and sorrow — the more heroic and more truly human of them.

And look at the great saints of Christendom — the early Christian martyrs and the present day ones behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains — the great missionaries and all the rest — the terrible pain and suffering and hardship that they endured in their lives.

— ‘Oh yes,’ you might say, — ‘but they were special cases — they were saints and they were able to endure their sufferings because they were saints.’

Ah no, it is the other way round. They did not take their pain and suffering that way because they were saints — on the contrary, they became saints precisely because they took it that way.

And that is precisely why God sends us pain and suffering, that we too might be purified by it, that we too might one day become saints. It was the method He used with Saint Paul that He might make him a great apostle — ‘This man,’ He said to Ananias when He appeared to him in a vision — ‘This man is to me a vessel of election, and I will show him’ — we might have expected, I will show him what great things he must do for my sake — but no, not that, something entirely different — ‘I will show him what great things he must suffer for my sake’ — suffer.

There is no easy way to the acquisition of character — there is no easy way to Heaven — like all great prizes they are taken only by storm — and the storming is done through suffering.

The storming may be hard — but how great the prize. Saint Paul knew what he was talking about in this matter of suffering, as God had promised that he would — yet he could sum it all up at the end — ‘I reckon that the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come, that shall be revealed in us.’ (Romans 8:18.)

THE INVITATION OF CHRIST.

I have been trying to show how from a human point of view we can come to see some of the reasons behind God’s permission of suffering. But even if we could not see at all, we would still have something to cling to, the greatest help of all, in the example of Our Lord’s own life. One thing only mattered for Our Lord — that He should do His Father’s will. And if it was the will of His Father that He should fail, humanly speaking, and suffer and die on the Cross, then — ‘Father, not My will but Yours be done’ was His cry, even in the depths of His agony. To be like Christ, not only

in the fact of His obedience but even in the way in which it was asked, that is what God wants from us as well. — ‘Unless a man take up his cross and follow Me, he cannot be My disciple,’ — those are Our Lord’s own words, and when He said ‘disciple’ He meant quite literally a follower, one who would be with Him always, to share with Him in His work no matter what it might be.

Now the redemption of the world from sin was won by Christ’s suffering and death, not just because they were suffering and death but because they were the Father’s will. If we are to be His disciples, then, not merely benefiting by the redemption but actually sharing in its winning, — if we are to be real ‘other Christs’ who take an active part in the whole redemptive plan, it will be along the same path that He took and by the same means, by pain and suffering and death offered for that purpose.

— ‘The disciple is not above His Master’ — nor does he wish to be. Christ suffered and died that He might redeem the world from sin; for His disciples that is enough — they will follow in His footsteps, blindly unto the end.

LIFE — GOD’S TAPESTRY.

May I conclude with an illustration that I think might be of some help? You remember the exhibition of French paintings that we had out here last year — the one we all got so excited about, one way or the other — and the lovely tapestry by Lurcat that was perhaps its highlight — that glorious poem of colour — greens and limes and russets, silver, amber and black?

If, like myself, you were curious, you went up to it when you hoped no one was looking, lifted up the corner and sneaked a quick look at the back. What a shock that was, and yet what a lesson as well. At the back, literally chaos, or at least apparent chaos — a tangled mass of loose ends, loops, knots and jumbled colours — and you blinked and stared and wondered until you turned back to the finished side and examined it again in some detail — and then suddenly you knew. — ‘But of course — how could it be otherwise — how could he have achieved that effect without all those apparently jumbled bits at the back? They weren’t haphazard or careless at all, but all part of a carefully thought-out plan to achieve that glorious result.’

Aren’t we doing something the same in this world — looking at the unfinished picture — the reverse side of the tapestry that God the great artist is working out to His plan, as Lurcat did at Aubusson? We see only that one side — the reverse — and even that unfinished — but God — He sees it all — as it comes out now, but even more important as it will come out when all His work is finished. If having seen Lurcat’s work we can trust him to know what he’s doing — I think we may safely trust God — even though as yet we cannot see. After all, it was He who made Lurcat and gave him his wonderful gift.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST.

Trust — that is the important word. There is so much more that could be said on this puzzling problem of evil — but it can all be summed up in that one word, — ‘trust’. That is where we started — that is where we must end — there is no answer otherwise.

Trust — it is the true basis of all enduring love — its hard-earned price and also its greatest reward. It is based, of course, on knowledge — an intimate knowledge of the person and an abiding certainty of his love. It holds true just as surely when the person we love is God.

If we know God truly, we trust Him, because we know beyond doubt that He loves us, and that the only reason in fact that He made us was that He might share His goodness with us.

And trusting Him, we accept without question from His hands whatever He may send us in the way of suffering and sorrow, knowing that however much it hurts, He sends it for our good. The problem, then, to one who trusts in God, is really no longer a problem, but a test of his trust.

One day that trust will be rewarded — that day when — ‘God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes, and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things will have passed away.’

In the meantime, we wait and trust, echoing the words of Saint Paul: — ‘What, then, shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or persecution, or the sword? For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.’
