

Leavening Church

Reflection – Louise Hampson

Today is the second Sunday of Lent, a time of reflection and self-examination where in normal times we look at our lives and seek to live more closely to the way Christ showed us. However, it is not normal times, it is a time of extraordinary danger and distress where our world is closer to all out war than we have been for decades. In such times it is difficult to understand why God does not simply step in and stop the evil being done, protect the people of Ukraine and indeed the Russian conscripts. Why does a loving God allow his innocent children to die at the hands of those consumed by the lust for power? Because it is always about power, whether the power of one person over another or of one country or regime over another. It is a question which has faced us in every decade, whether in war zones or in the murder of individuals, even of children murdered by their parents after months of abuse? How can God let these things happen? It is something which Chine McDonald, the director of the Christian think tank Theos, former director of Christian Aid and a writer and broadcaster, has written about recently and I am drawing on her words in this reflection.

Most people will at some point in their lives experience suffering: from the loss of a job or the breakdown of a relationship to tragic circumstances, including illness and bereavement. These are things that are experienced by people all over the world from the richest countries to the poorest. Coming to terms with the fact that bad things happen seems to be part of the human experience.

On top of bad things happening to individuals, we see how bad things happen on a global scale – economic, racial and gender injustices, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies, famine and genocide. Sometimes the sheer scale and frequency of these horrors can feel overwhelming, as many feel now about Ukraine. So much suffering, so much pain. It is no wonder that we find ourselves asking: why do so many bad things happen? Christian thinkers throughout the centuries have tried to answer this question. The problem of evil is a difficult thing to reconcile with belief in a good and loving God.

For some people the existence of evil is in itself enough evidence that God does not exist. But for us as Christians, God's goodness is not in doubt, despite the existence of evil. Although evil remains a problem and can never be described as good, there are different ideas that can help us reconcile the existence of God with the fact that bad things happen. When bad things happen, there are a number of different reactions we might have; different ways we might reconcile these happenings with a God of love. Some people accept suffering because they believe ultimately in a sense of divine purpose; that God has a long view of individual and human history and that at some point in the future – in a life that is yet to come – the bad things will make sense and that we will be able to see that ultimately it led to some good. When it comes to suffering caused by humans, we must remember that God has given each of us free will. We are free to make our own decisions, to direct our own paths. Free to do good. But this also means we are free to do bad things, too. Perhaps it's easier to explain these bad things that happen as a result of human actions. People murder, steal, lie and cheat as a result of being free to choose to do things that hurt others, or themselves. This is, tragically, what we have seen in Ukraine. We see this in the way that children behave. They sometimes do things that are wrong, causing pain to themselves or to others. While good parents want to keep their children from causing harm, they know that their children have to be free to make those choices. Some Christians over the centuries have tried to explain that bad things happen because in creating the world, God designed it to have the possibility of evil within it, despite being created good. It's as if we are watching a game of chess and God is the grandmaster. We have no idea what his game plan is – all we can see is the next square. We cannot want free will when things are good

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and expect to have it all sorted out for us when things go bad, we have individual and collective responsibility.

Many of the wars and atrocities of recent decades have been far away, involving people who feel physically and culturally remote from us and therefore something about which we have felt sad but perhaps not that closely involved. I vividly remember discussing the Syrian conflict with someone I work with and them shrugging and saying, “Yes, it’s awful, but they’ve been doing this to each other for centuries, it’s nothing new”! Whilst there may be some historical truth in that, it should do nothing to diminish the horror of it and the lives destroyed, it should not make it acceptable or inevitable. Maybe we in western Europe are guilty, as the Archbishop of York said last week, of taking our eye off the ball, of taking peace for granted instead of remembering it is something to be worked at and for. Peace is not simply the absence of war any more than good health is simply the absence of active disease. If any good at all can be seen in the current awful situation in Ukraine it is that countries that had been drifting, maybe sleepwalking, into an insular nationalism, a concern only for their own wellbeing, have come together in condemnation and practical action in the face of the awful endpoint of such an attitude.

As Christians we are called to be hopeful people. Despite all the bad things that we see around the world and in our personal lives and in those of the people we love, hope is something we cling to. This hope doesn’t make us pretend that positive thinking will make everything OK and protect us from the bad things that happen. Anyone who watches the news sees that it would be foolish to think that Christianity is some sort of shield that means only good things will come our way or in the way of others who believe. Instead, this hope is an eternal one. It’s a hope that says although there are so many bad things happening around me, and in the world at large, ultimately things will be made right by God in the end. All Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is always with them, as if Jesus himself was walking alongside them, even if at times that is hard to remember. At times of deep suffering, the Holy Spirit is able to bring God’s comfort. When bad things happen, God is right there in the midst of our pain. God is able to understand our suffering because Jesus suffered the most unimaginable physical and emotional pain. On the cross he felt abandoned by his heavenly father and by his closest friends. He endured separation from God so that we need never be separated from God’s love. This does not mean that we will live lives without suffering. The heartbreaking reality is that bad things will continue to happen. But as most of us know, suffering is made just that little bit more bearable when we are not left alone in it. The beauty of the Christian story is that God is with us in the pain, and that ultimately – through Jesus bridging the gap between God and humanity – we will be united with him in a place where bad things will never happen again. Does that mean we don’t have to do anything, that we should just sit back and say it is all part of God’s plan? No, of course not: our freewill to do evil is counterbalanced by our freewill to do good. This has been shown already in the way people all over the world and all over our country have responded to the plight of the Ukrainian people and the efforts of political leaders to put an end to the evil ambitions of a deranged despot. It may also lead to suffering on a much wider scale but we know that God is with us in our darkest times, whether personal, national or international: the ultimate suffering and sacrifice of Christ on the cross shows us that. The crucifixion is the darkest time of Lent, and we are left seemingly alone and in despair, but then we have the glory of the resurrection. Let us all pray that the light of Easter breaks forth very soon in Ukraine and in the world - God’s time is not our time but He hears our prayers.