

'The Cure for Anxiety' - Jesus!

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 6 verses 25 to 34 (AMP)

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, stop being worried or anxious (perpetually uneasy, distracted) about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, as to what you will wear. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow [seed] nor reap [the harvest] nor gather [the crops] into barns, and yet your heavenly Father keeps feeding them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷ And who of you by worrying can add one hour to [the length of] his life? ²⁸ And why are you worried about clothes? See how the lilies and wildflowers of the field grow; they do not labor nor do they spin [wool to make clothing], ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory and splendor dressed himself like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive and green today and tomorrow is [cut and] thrown [as fuel] into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! ³¹ Therefore do not worry or be anxious (perpetually uneasy, distracted), saying, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ ³² For the [pagan] Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; [but do not worry,] for your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But first and most importantly seek (aim at, strive after) His kingdom and His righteousness [His way of doing and being right—the attitude and character of God], and all these things will be given to you also.

³⁴ “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

SERMON

Last month we discussed that difficult subject of life after death; the fact that those whom Jesus rejects (the goats), will spend eternity in Hell, because of their choice not to accept Him as their Saviour, and those He refers to as sheep (the righteous), will spend eternity with Him in Heaven.

Today – our Harvest Festival service - we celebrate God's amazing grace in providing us with all that we need to sustain our lives, whilst we live here on this earth in our mortal bodies.

The good news is that God loves us so much that Jesus reassures us in the Scripture we have just heard - and other Scriptures - that if God provides food freely for the birds of the air and all living creatures, how **much more** does He love to provide for mankind; for those He created in His own image and whom He loves so deeply that He came down to earth in the form of a man to die on a Cross in our place for our sins, so that those of us who believe in Him might become his adopted sons and daughters, and spend eternity with Him in heaven.

God loves His creation, but most of all He loves **you and me** and all of mankind.

He hates sin and wickedness, **but** He loves the sinner - the person; in fact God loves **all** the people that He created, whether believers or not. In Scripture (Matthew 5:45) it says, '**He makes the sun shine on the righteous and the un-righteous.**'

He promises to provide for us. And here in the UK we have so much provision that sometimes, when Michele and I walk around the supermarket, we are overwhelmed by the variety of meat, cheeses, fresh fruit and vegetables and other produce on offer. In fact, we get so used to the huge variety, that when something **isn't** available, or has been sold out, I have to confess that I used to get quite annoyed! How terrible that is - that we can get cross about one sold-out item in the food store, when millions around the world are starving to death. Michele quickly gets me to realise that if something has sold out, I just need to choose something else instead!

And today, whereas you might be expecting me to talk about the wonderful harvest that God provides for us all - year after year - instead I want to try to answer a difficult question, relating to God's provision.

It is one that many unbelievers will use to argue **against** the God of love that we believe in. And the question is this...

If God exists, and if He is the God of bountiful provision, why are so many people in His world not just starving to death (through lack of food) but also dying from all manner of illnesses; and from cold-blooded murder, as well as being killed as a result of acts of terrorism, wars, and the like?

And if we look again at today's reading, we get a 'part-answer'.

If our life is a constant struggle, maybe it's time to consider Jesus's words in verse 33 of today's reading. He says this...

'First and most importantly seek (aim at, strive after) God's kingdom and His righteousness [His way of doing and being right—the attitude and character of God], and all these things will be given to you also'.

What things? Well he was talking about what we **need** wasn't he – Food, drink and fine clothing...

So we might ask ourselves: Are we ***'doing and being right'***? In other words, am I acting fairly in my dealings with others? Am I going the extra mile to help others? Am I forgiving, loving, kind, and compassionate to others? Do I apply the biblical principle that it is better to give than to receive. In essence, "Am I loving my neighbour as myself? Am I displaying ***'the attitude and character of God'***"?

If you are doing these things, then Jesus promises you that you don't need to worry. He says, 'Seek first the Kingdom of God' and He will take good care of us. But we have seen that if we are not Kingdom seekers, if we are not working to be like God in our behaviour, we may suffer as a result.

The second reason why we suffer, I believe, is due to what The Bible calls 'sin'.

Let me acknowledge that for most people 'sin' is a wholly inadequate explanation for why the innocent suffer, but please bear with me.

God, when He created mankind, gave to all of us freedom of choice; arguably one of the riskiest decisions He took, and when people do not believe in their creator, or become enraged, or possessed by the devil, people will use that God-given gift of freedom to abuse others; in some cases they will abuse others in the most horrendous and sometimes unimaginable ways, as we know from some modern-day news stories.

Well, you might say, I can see that; that makes sense; mankind's sin can result in (for example) people in the Western World eating whatever they want, often to excess, and as a result, the poorer people in third world countries starving to death because they can't afford to pay the prices that we can.

You might also agree that if we don't look after God's creation like He commanded us to do, and we deliberately pollute the land, the rivers, the seas and the atmosphere with waste products, either from industry or because perhaps we don't take care in how we dispose of our own litter and household waste, then the result is a change in climate and weather patterns.

So some people may die due to the resulting effects of our sin. Such results, we know, include global warming, drought, floods, hurricanes, land, sea and river pollution, food poisoning, and the like.

But, I am sure you will also be thinking, if God is God, if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, which the Bible tells us He is, then why doesn't He supernaturally intervene to stop all the evil and sin in the world, and make sure none of us go without, and ensure too, that we all live happily together.

And the answer to that question is 'I don't know.'

In fact, nobody really knows, but many – far more intelligent people than me - have tried to answer that question throughout the ages.

Whilst there are many personal testimonies where God has miraculously saved people from death or injury, healed the dying, or even resurrected people from the dead, the number of these miracles reported globally, is not as frequent and as high as we would all like.

In preparing this talk I took a look at the internet and found an interesting Christian website with some good answers concerning the question of suffering. And if you want to take away a photocopy of what it says, I have printed some copies off for you here; help yourself at the end.

But when we turn to the Bible, we do see some clues as to possible answers, most of which are included in this hand-out.

As I've said before, the Bible tells us that the first man God created (Adam), lived with the first woman God created (Eve) in perfect harmony and bliss - with God - in the Garden of Eden. Sin did not exist upon the earth when God first created them.

God's enemy Satan, a fallen angel, very likely one of the inner circle of Arch-angels rebelled against God and fled from His presence with a third of the angels and set himself up with the fallen angels against the rule and reign of God.

God allowed Adam and Eve to be tested by Satan and we see in the Bible that they failed the test. Adam and Eve enjoyed the freedom of paradise (in Eden) and there was only one thing God commanded Adam and Eve not to do – they were forbidden from eating the fruit of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. Why did God do that? Because the Bible says if man ate from that tree, he would become like God and would for the first time know what it is to sin and undertake evil acts. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to eat of that tree, they succumbed, and sin entered human kind. Ever since then, we have learned about the 'pleasures' of sin and most human beings like it, some liking it a lot.

We are supposed to treat sin like a deadly rattlesnake but for many it 'tastes' like a strawberry milkshake!

In the book of Proverbs, we see that God allows us to suffer as a result of our own sin, that is clear:

Proverbs 15:27

He who profits unlawfully brings suffering to his own house, but he who hates bribes [and does not receive nor pay them] will live.

Proverbs 22:3

A prudent and far-sighted person sees the evil [of sin] and hides himself [from it], but the naive continue on and are punished [by suffering the consequences of sin].

I doubt there is any one of us here today who cannot testify to the truth of those Proverbs. Either being found out by one of our parents when we were a naughty child - or later in life, learning the consequence of our sin as a grown-up.

When we turn to sin, other people can suffer too, and that for me is the great tragedy. God allows this, but I know not why. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel; one killed the other. The Middle East has been caught up in religious hatred ever since.

Whilst I cannot tell you why God does not intervene to prevent the suffering of innocent people, I can tell you that the root cause of suffering is people turning away from God's Ten Commandments and following their own self-seeking agenda. When people live a life that excludes God, and they rebel against His Word, it will usually result in behaviour that is sinful, such as: being controlling and manipulating in the home, being abusive and bullying at school, burglary and theft, telling lies at work, being dishonest in politics, or committing horrendous acts of rape, torture and death on the battlefield. The list goes on.

So firstly, it is clear that sin is behind our suffering.

Many Christians believe that God shows His righteous anger against people-groups, and allows suffering to come upon them in an attempt to get them to repent of unbelief or appalling sin. So, He may send floods or widespread forest fires – for example - as an act of judgement against a country or group of people who are deliberately being rebellious or unrepentant. It may simply be that He is trying to wake us up from our sin of not looking after His creation, or judging us for pursuing the materialistic agenda that so many think will bring happiness and joy, instead of seeking His Kingdom, which is the only way of finding **real** and lasting joy and peace.

Twenty to thirty years ago, some Christians thought God judged men who engaged in the sin of homosexual sex by sending what at that time was a new virus – Aids and then HIV - to afflict them. Personally, I am most uncomfortable about such an assertion because it is very clear to me that the God of the New Testament is a God of forgiveness, He is not a vindictive God.

If He was, we would all deserve a daily bout of severe punishment! Having said that, He is a just God and we escape judgement through confession and repentance of our sins.

My third and final point, and arguably the most compelling, as to why God not only allows suffering but also doesn't usually intervene in it, is for us to understand that suffering is an inherent part of God's character. There are things He can only teach us through suffering, and not only that, but He is not some awful psychopath - because if He was, He personally would not be prepared to suffer on behalf of us all. And He has willingly suffered because of our sin throughout time immemorial, and suffered greatly when He walked the earth and was nailed to the Cross.

Whilst this doesn't adequately address the specific issue of the death of people in cold-blood, it helps, I believe, in understanding why God allows suffering in one form or another to come upon us all at certain times, both to those who are guilty of sin and those who are innocent of it.

The word suffering is mentioned well over one hundred times in the Bible and I think the key is to recognise that when God came down to earth as a man – in the form of Jesus Christ - to teach us how to behave like Him, and then die on the Cross in order to save us from eternal damnation, He came as a suffering servant.

Isaiah introduces us to the Suffering Servant (The Messiah) 700 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Here are his words taken from Isaiah chapter 53:

***'He was despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and pain and acquainted with grief;
And like One from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we did not appreciate His worth or esteem Him.
But [in fact] He has borne our griefs,
And He has carried our sorrows and pains;
Yet we [ignorantly] assumed that He was stricken,
Struck down by God and degraded and humiliated [by Him].
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our wickedness [our sin, our injustice, our wrongdoing];
The punishment [required] for our well-being fell on Him,
And by His stripes (wounds) we are healed'.***

God suffered the pain of being rejected by His people for hundreds of years throughout Old Testament history. He gave them countless opportunities to repent and turn back to Him. Finally, He came to Earth and suffered at the hands of His people, suffering the pain of an excruciating death on the Cross. All this was part of His plan to bring salvation to those who would find the faith to believe that, although we do not understand His ways, although at times we wish suffering would be eliminated from the planet, nevertheless God came to earth to suffer and die in our place, so that if we will believe in Jesus the Son and obey God's Words, we can be saved and inherit eternal life.

In Hebrews chapter 5 and verse 8 we learn this of Christ:

'Although He was a Son [who had never been disobedient to the Father], He learned [active, special] obedience through what He suffered'.

So here we learn that one of the purposes of suffering is that we should learn to obey God.

The apostle Peter in 1 Peter chapter 2 is talking about how to behave and act when working for others and he mentions how to respond when treated unfairly, and he says this in verse 20.

'What kind of credit is there if, when you do wrong and are punished for it, you endure it patiently? But if when you do what is right and patiently bear [undeserved] suffering, this finds favor with God'.

So, from Scripture, we can see that God not only allows suffering, but He looks to us to endure it, and when we do, we earn favour with Him.

When we are faced with suffering sometimes God is using it to teach us obedience - to His Word and His ways.

He loves us so much that He doesn't want to leave us where we are, but knows that only by making us more like Him, will we then be fulfilled, joyful and at peace. It may mean that He resorts to allowing us to undergo suffering to bring about his plans for our life.

In order to open up the way of salvation, which is available for everyone on the planet, if they put their trust in God through faith in Jesus Christ, God's plan was that His only Son should suffer in a way that to the human brain makes no sense at all, but to God makes perfect sense!

Very often there is no logical answer as to why God does some of the things He does, but He is God. Talking of Himself, God says in Isaiah 55 verse 8:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord".

This subject is huge, and people have written whole books about it. In this short time, I have simply scratched at the surface, but I hope that I have given you some food for thought....

May God be with us all, and help us to cope, as we go through our own periods of suffering during our lives here on earth... AMEN