

# SUFFERING

*(Matthew 6.25–34 and Job 38.1-21)*

*The Lord does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone - Lamentations 3.22-33*

*Jesus did not come into the world to stop suffering, nor to take it away, but to fill it with his presence. Roy Castle*

One morning in the last week of 1977 we took our 3-year-old daughter Catherine to the doctor with a sore throat and a funny rash. We went from the surgery to the children's ward of Middlesbrough General Hospital dropping off our 7-month-old baby with a startled friend. The open ward was noisy - lots of aimless urchins plus some very ill children. By dinner time we knew we had a desperately sick daughter with leukaemia who could be dead by the end of the day. We were terrified and just clung together.

So started the darkest time of our life as a family. A young boy died in the first couple of days. He was one of the cluster of twelve children diagnosed with leukaemia at this time. Dark Rain Falling! Catherine died in our arms 15 months later and shortly afterwards both our fathers also died and my mother became extremely ill. Geoff and I and our son were deeply and permanently affected by the experience. Thirty-five years later I still have to force myself to go into a hospital.

I am very aware that many people in this congregation can identify with this experience and as for the wider world I think it could well be the norm. In the past over 60% of children died before they were 5 and this still happens in the third world. How do we square this universal suffering with a God of love and how do we explain it to others? Suffering is everywhere. It is part of life. Perhaps the hardest to bear is when someone we love is suffering. It's a truism that to love means to suffer.

So what can I say this morning? I thought it might help if I shared with you the parts of the Bible that helped me to come to some measure of understanding and what I learned from others.

What did I do in the long night hours just sitting with Catherine? Well, I read the book of Job. Sonia has just read part of it today. A Jewish wise man wrote

Job about 450 years before the birth of Jesus as an extended poem as an explanation of why the innocent suffer. The writer portrays Job a good man, faithful to God's laws who lost everything. His whole family, his livelihood, his dignity, and his health - the devil is blamed for this. His friends gather round and offer him comfort - basically it's all Job's fault it's a punishment for something he has done. Job's comforters! They argue together and get nowhere.

Then God speaks to Job - and Job speaks to God. God affirms Job's faithfulness and draws Job away from his suffering to show him the bigger picture. Job grows in his knowledge of God. He says. *My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.* Job then forgives his friends and prays for them.

There is more from Job. In the middle of his distress Job encounters God and gives this prophecy. *'I know that my redeemer lives and at the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed then in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes. I and not another. How my heart breaks within me.* Job's friends are unable to support him - maybe after death God will.

Another book helped; Lamentations was written when the Israelites were driven into exile. *'Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning: great is his faithfulness.. Though he brings grief he will show compassion so great is his unfailing love for he does not willingly bring affliction or grief on the children of men.'*

Reading these helped me to look beyond the suffering to look nearer the sky. Keep the conversation with God going.

There is more though because of God's great love we have Jesus and that changes everything. Without the cross and what it says about God's love for us we would all be floundering. Job needed God but God yearns for us. It is a great mystery but because God loves us he suffers with us. The cross makes all the difference to how we think about suffering. *'Jesus didn't come into the world to stop suffering nor to take it away but to fill it with his presence.'* And when God's Kingdom fully comes there will be no more suffering.

It is the job of his followers to alleviate suffering to help build his kingdom.

In the second reading Jesus tells us to first seek the kingdom. This is the reason for many Christians becoming part of the healing profession. The two doctors who looked after Catherine were examples of this. Noel Harker our Haematologist who was linked with the Whitby sisters and Joan Angus the Paediatrician were two of the most wonderful if formidable Christian women I have ever met - both unmarried. Both women gave us advice with authority as well they might - they represented their Lord.

On that first day in the hospital we had a visit from the vicar who married us - Noel knew him and had told him to come. A sad little girl whose mother only rarely visited had latched onto us. When she saw our visitor she said with big round eyes. 'Are you Jesus?' Gordon laughed but you know that was what he was to us and to a small neglected child and because he continued to visit to the staff and parents in the ward.

Noel lost the 12 children she treated with leukaemia that black year and when asked how she coped said she had a group who joined her for Morning Prayer each day and for Communion.

In our situation marriage breakdown ran at 80%. She gave us profound advice on how to look after each other and keep our marriage sound - to look beyond the immediate situation.

The current pop song was 'One Day at a Time' sung by Lena Martell. On hearing it she told us that this was the way we should live - always. This taken directly from our second reading. She suggested that we should reduce this to an hour at a time or less whilst Catherine was with us. She also told us that if we thought Catherine would be better at home then to tell her and she would support us.

And then there was Catherine herself. She viewed her illness differently from how we did. She lived for the minute. If she was well that was fine. If she was ill that was also fine. She took joy in little things. She raised our spirits. All the children had something about them - a calmness. They had a light within them.

So what did I learn? To look up and see the wider picture and keep praising God. To accept God's love shown in other people. To live by the day trusting in God's grace.

If Jesus hadn't suffered God's love wouldn't have been made visible and if we hadn't suffered we wouldn't have known how much God's love is made known through his followers.

And prayer. A total stranger from a local church rang us and asked if we would like prayer. The group she ran prayed for us for two years. Doreen rang Geoff up each week. It made you feel surrounded by God's love.

About a month before Catherine died I went to a late opening at our local chemist. There was a queue mainly of men and it was raining. Rev. Ted Appleyard joined us - there for medicine for his foster child who was dying. Ted and I talked together about the children and Ted suggested we pray for them - which he did. Then we realised that everyone there had been listening. they all joined in - hats off and much crossing of selves. Ted asked them all to pray when they went home.

Prayer works and makes sense of suffering because of Jesus.

O Father, give our spirits power to climb  
to the Fountain of all light and be purified.  
Break through the mists of doubt and the weight of pain.  
Shine forth in splendour, you that are calm weather  
and quiet resting place for faithful souls.  
To see you is the end and the beginning,  
You carry us and you go before us,  
You are the journey and the journey's end.  
*Boethius*