

"THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING"

INTRODUCTION

No sensitive person could read the papers this past week, listen to the news, look at the pictures, without some sense of shock and hurt at the suffering of a sizeable number of his fellowmen. The slaughter in Saigon, a plane crash in Texas that brought death to eighty-four persons and grief to their surviving loved ones, twenty-five coal miners trapped inside a two-mile coal shaft by thousands of gallons of water in West Virginia, the death of Lurleen Wallace after a two year battle against cancer. What we see in the head-lines of the world beyond us, we also see on the landscape of life nearer to us. Older people, lingering with broken bodies and minds. Strong people, struck down at noon-day. Young people, hurt by accidents, interruptions, frustrations, and sickness.

There was an intriguing review of an English play that came to New York in the month of January entitled, "Joe Egg". It is the story of a couple whose child is a spastic and who lives like a vegetable. I stopped at one sentence in the review that appeared in one of the papers, "The characters are English and live in Bristol. But they could just as well be Americans". And, of course, they are Americans. They are people who live in our city. They are our friends, our next door neighbors. And by changing the nature of the trouble and the tragedy, they are ourselves.

This problem of suffering is one of the most bewildering questions that confront us. This was the bafflement expressed in the couplet from Archibald MacLeish's play, "J. B.":

If God is God, he is not good,
If God is good, he is not God"

Indeed, Mr. MacLeish wrote an article in a religious periodical in which he posed the same question in prose:

"How can we believe in our lives unless we believe in the justice of God, and how can we believe in the justice of God in a world in which the innocent perish in vast meaningless massacres, and brutal and dishonest men foul all the lovely things? These are the questions we in our generation ask ourselves....."

"Who will answer....who will answer?" It would be false and presumptuous to suggest that the Christian faith provides neat and complete answers. It does not. One man use to say that one of his chief reasons for wanting to get to heaven was to get God in a corner and ask him some questions. So say we all. But some of us would still hold that the Man from Nazareth provides enough clues for our confidence and enough light to find our way. ~~Think about~~ some of the answers of Jesus when we come to the New Testament with this problem of suffering. Consider then...

THE REALITY OF SUFFERING

First-off: he has something to say to us about the reality of suffering. He never pretended that it would be otherwise with him or with us. "In this world, you shall have tribulation". He never once said, "Be good and you will be unhurt and untroubled". If he had said that, his own life would have belied his words. For he was good - and he got hurt - in the shape of a cross. His disciples became great and good men - and they ran into all kinds of trouble. His first lieutenant, Paul, was as strong a Christian as the ages have produced - but that did not save him from sickness and shipwreck and persecution and execution.

Jesus would seem to say to us....you can count on it.....there will be some rough places in life - accidents, discouragements, interruptions, separations, grief, death. "In this world, you shall have tribulation.....if any man would come after me, let him take up his cross...." That's the way life is and it just could be that this is the way that life must be.

A Professor at Drew University a few years back by the name of Edwin Lewis summed it up in clear fashion:

"Life is compacted of difficulties. Tribulation is man's constant companion. Our world is much more a battlefield than a playground. We are wise to remember that. We are thankful for the play, but the purpose of the play is to prepare us for the inevitable battle. May it not be that the only alternative to things being the way they are is - nothing at all? This way - or no way! Conflict - nothing! The possibility of defeat - or no possibility of victory. The danger of hell - or no possibility of heaven".

It seems to me that the first part of Christ's answer to the problem of suffering is some degree of acceptance in the presence of suffering - neither angry rebellion nor passive resignation - but acceptance that sees some difficulty as part of the scenery and substance of life? The brief and helpful prayer of Reinhold Neibuhr's comes to mind:

"O God, grant me the courage to change that which can be changed, the grace to accept that which cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference".

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUFFERING

Come a second step and see that Jesus has something to say about the responsibility for suffering. And it is a second and a further step, because far too often acceptance of suffering is equated with the will of God. You know how often that happens. A child dies. A youth is killed in an accident. And a person is struck down in the prime of life. And people stand around and talk about "the will of God" and frame resolutions that begin, "Whereas God in his infinite wisdom..."

But I for one confess to you that I cannot make that out of the words and the ways of Jesus. Did not he say such things as "it is not your Father's will that one of these little ones should perish...." Did he not devote much of his ministry to challenging disease and blindness and emotional disorders. Did he not stand on a hill overlooking a city in turmoil and say, "If only you had known the things that make for peace...." Infant mortality, sickness, war - these were not the will of God - but their opposites - normal life span, health, peace.

Yet - in some respects, then, the mystery only deepens. If such positive goals are the will of God, then why doesn't he assert his power and achieve them? That was the question that they were asking at Calvary - friend and foe alike. If God is all that this man had been saying that he is, let him show himself and stop the proceedings. Only Jesus seemed to understand that this was the way it had to be - that God had shared something of his sovereignty with man in giving him freedom of choice and setting him to live in community - and that there were times when the consequences were full of hurt and heartache for the good and the bad alike.

There is a sizeable amount of suffering that is not so mysterious - broken cars, broken bodies, broken commandments, broken lives and broken homes, broken cities, broken world. God put a world into our fumbling hands - with all of the resources and the beauty that we could ask for or think of. He filled that world with the possibility of miracles, the power of atoms, the strangeness of electricity, the wonder of the senses. He gave us the glory of the lighted minds and appointed us as managers of a stretch of time and talent.

Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say that every suffering that falls on man comes from the single or conjoint operation of four factors: (1) the law abiding universe, (2) the evolutionary nature of the world, (3) the individual power of choice, (4) the inter-meshed mutuality of living. This gives us something to think about and perhaps occasion to pause when we are so tempted to shake our fists at God and cry "why". For all of the pain and suffering involved in our human experience, would we change any one of these factors if we were granted omnipotence for an hour?

Yet...even when we have done our best to accept responsibility and place responsibility, there are still some fog banks. Which is what the surgeon was saying when he declared that - if ever he comes face to face with God - he will carry a cancer cell with him and will show it to the Almighty, crying, "WHY"... "WHY" Each of us has his or her own store of questions. Why cancer? Why deformed children? Why a bolt of electricity striking a plane? Why rattlesnakes? There is still a heavy haze on the horizon. But in bringing our questions about suffering to the light of the New Testament, I simply record the fact that Jesus lived by faith that suffering is not willed by God in each individual instance, but that there is a degree of shared responsibility for it - with mind and purpose behind the creation that permits the suffering.

THE SHARING IN SUFFERING

Still - we have not come to the most important aspect of Jesus' answer to our experiences of suffering. Not insights about the REALITY of suffering, nor the RESPONSIBILITY for suffering - but more - the assurance of a sharing in suffering.

The cross shining there before us is the persistent New Testament declaration that God is involved in suffering with us - that in Christ he entered completely into the human situation and predicament and ran the whole gamut of human experience, with a redemptive love that could be hurt by the cross, but not halted by the cross.

And it was the wonder and glory of this sharing process that Paul kept celebrating in his letters: "Now unto the power that is at work within us....." "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us...." "We are handicapped... puzzled...persecuted...but we never have to stand it alone" "Nothing can separate us from the love of God..."

J. B. Phillips, to whom so many of us feel indebted for his modern illuminating version of portions of the Bible, said that he started the work of translating during the years of the Second World War when he realized that the people of London to whom he was trying to preach had so much in common with the people to whom Paul wrote in Greece and Asia Minor. He said that they were "all Christians in danger..." Phillips sent a copy of the first book he translated - Colossians * to his friend, C. S. Lewis and that great man replied with encouragement by saying, "It's like seeing an old picture after it's been cleaned".

The New Testament is addressed to "people in danger" whether in Jerusalem or Rome in the 1st century or London and New York in the 20th century. It is the continuing word that we are not alone - that one enters into our lives with love and steadiness that in some fashion can transform us from victims into victors!

As some of you know, I have a sixteen year old niece - attractive, athletic, bright, talented - a lovely spirit who in these days and hours is passing through a dark night of the soul with a long, debilitating illness for which her doctors give little hope for a cure. So many of us, these past nine months, have stood around her hospital bed in deep despair, asking in the privacy of our thoughts, "why"...."why should this happen to a sixteen year old...." It came to me this past week as I reflected on this whole matter of suffering that this important question of "why" has not been important to her. From what my sister has told me, she has never raised it - never ranted or raved about the injustice of it all, never showing signs of feeling sorry for herself, living triumphantly above her pains - accepting it quietly and receiving and relaying to those who have been near to her some amazing grace and strength and faith. And the more I have thought about it, the more I have realized how often this is true. While a chorus of onlookers chant: "who will answer" - sometimes the people most concerned find an answer in a sufficient supply of light and love.

The supreme contribution of our faith to the problem of suffering is not so much in supplying a theory to explain it as in furnishing a power to surmount it. And the cross is still God's great sign - a witness to the powerful love that entered and still enters into suffering, that guides us through the desert places and even, on occasion, causes a rose to bloom in the desert.

And this is what George Matheson was writing about and singing about in the hymn that we sung before the sermon, a hymn that many of us love and cherish. George Matheson was blinded at the age of 18 - shortly thereafter jilted by a girl who did not want to marry a blind man - and still he persisted in his studies and eventually entered the ministry. One day - years later - he set down the words of a hymn. He called the hymn the "fruit of his suffering", and said he had the feeling that it was dictated to him by an inner voice and he was sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes.

"The fruit of suffering".....a phrase to ponder. How would we describe the harvest of suffering in our lives - bitterness, despair, defeat - or could it be that we too understnad a little of what George Matheson was describing in those words we sang earlier in the service here this morning:

"O Love that wilt not let me go...
O Light that followest all my way....
O Joy that seekest me through pain.....
O Cross that liftest up my head....."

CLOSING: The reality of suffering. The responsibility for suffering. The sharing in our experiences of suffering. These are the answers we find when we come to the New Testament with the problem of suffering.

LET US PRAY Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, and our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we find thy Word, knowing that in it thou wilt speak to us and to our condition. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen