The Mystery of Suffering

Job and His Friends by Ilya Repin. 1869.

The difficulty raised by the very grave and manifest sufferings in our world, especially the suffering of the innocent, is the most frequent and obvious objection presented to Christians against our belief in a good, loving and omnipotent God. This matter of human suffering and how to reconcile it with God's goodness is addressed in various ways throughout Sacred Scripture, but there is one book in particular whose whole purpose is to address this question and to reveal to us, at least partially, God's answer to the question. The book referred to is the Book of Job.

In the Book of Job, after the righteous Job has suffered the complete loss of all his possessions and children and then the loss of his health—as he sits on his heap of dung—he is visited by three friends who come to console him. Naturally, their conversation turns to the question of why God has permitted the righteous Job to suffer all these evils. The three friends of Job are full of answers. They claim to understand why God has acted like this. It must be that Job has sinned and his suffering is the just wages of his sin. But Job defends his innocence. The attitude of Job throughout the dialogue is one of questioning and prayer. It is worth noting that in the end God vindicates this attitude of Job and condemns his friends who pretend to have all the answers.

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There is an important lesson here for us. In the face of the atrocities and tragedies and great sufferings of life, perhaps the best and most correct attitude we can adopt is an attitude of questioning and prayer. Beware of those who think they can explain the mystery of human suffering—especially if they are not saints.

In the end, God does appear out of the whirlwind, out of the storm, to address Job's questions. Beginning with the magnificent chapter 38, God addresses Job's questions not by giving him a direct answer, but by

asking His own questions of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ...Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?"

However, God's questions to Job do, in a way, constitute an answer to Job's questions about the suffering of innocent and righteous people. In effect, God is saying to Job: The suffering of the innocent is not without purpose, it is not without sense. But you cannot possibly know what the purpose and sense of suffering is unless you are God. Your little, created intellect is much too small and limited to know these things. You are not in a position to know the reason why, but you can be sure of one thing: there is a reason why. You will just have to trust me.

William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job.* 1826

In a way, given our present condition, it is the only answer God can give us. In order to know the purpose and sense of human suffering we would have to see how God will use it all for the perfection of the universe and we cannot possibly see that from our very limited perspective.

As a priest, one is privileged to come to know many peoples' inner stories. One finds that most people have some very deep hurts in their lives. Hurts that are so deep that they really don't know how to handle them; they really don't know what to do with the pain. I think one of the reasons people are drawn to some of the Eastern religions and to New Age spirituality is that they claim to be able to empower people to deal with the deep pains and hurts of life. These spiritualties will offer certain methods and techniques that are under our control to alleviate the suffering. That is a very appealing prospect. We desperately want to be in control of our lives. These spiritualities offer a way of salvation, but a way that, in the end, must disappoint and lead to disillusionment. In a way, these spiritualties defeat one of the very purposes for which God allows suffering.

One reason God allows us to suffer is to teach us —to teach us about our creatureliness and our dependence; to teach us that we were not made for this world but for something beyond this world. This world is really like a big womb in which we are developing and waiting for our definitive birth into the much more real world beyond.

When all is going well in our lives, when all is prosperous and pleasant and comfortable we are easily deceived and lose sight of our purpose. Good fortune easily deceives. Bad fortune is a good teacher. Because it is more important to know the truth and to gain wisdom, God, in His concern for us allows us to suffer.

But the fact remains that when we are undergoing some trial or are in the midst of some acute suffering, we are often tempted to question or doubt God's love for us. It is natural for us to ask and wonder: If God loves me why does He not free me from this terrible affliction. Perhaps, at least part of our difficulty lies in our too superficial understanding of the nature of love and our tendency to equate it with mere kindness. If we

consider just one example from the human realm, we can see that when we love something, we may, at the same time cause, it pain.

We could consider the example of a great artist. This example is especially fitting, since in Scripture God's relation to man is often likened to that of an artist to his work of art. He is the potter, we are the clay; He is the builder, we are the stones. We are in fact a divine work of art and He is trying to fashion us into something beautiful and worthy of Him. C.S. Lewis, in reflecting on this kind of love, has this to say:

"Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life—the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child—he will take endless trouble—and would thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were [something with feelings]. One can imagine a picture [that had feelings], after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed us for a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less" (The Problem of Pain, pp.30-31).

Surely, we can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to release us from some suffering or affliction. But if He doesn't answer our prayer, it may be because He wants to show us more love, not less. He wants to take the clay of our nature and turn it into something beautiful and this may take some rough working. If we were able to see our lives from God's perspective, we would be able to discern that not only does all the suffering of our lives make sense, but we would also see that our sufferings will be the source of our greatest happiness and glory in eternity. Looking back, we wouldn't trade our suffering for the world. So let us strive to join the company of God's chosen ones who bore their sufferings in a spirit of deep faith and trust. ✣