

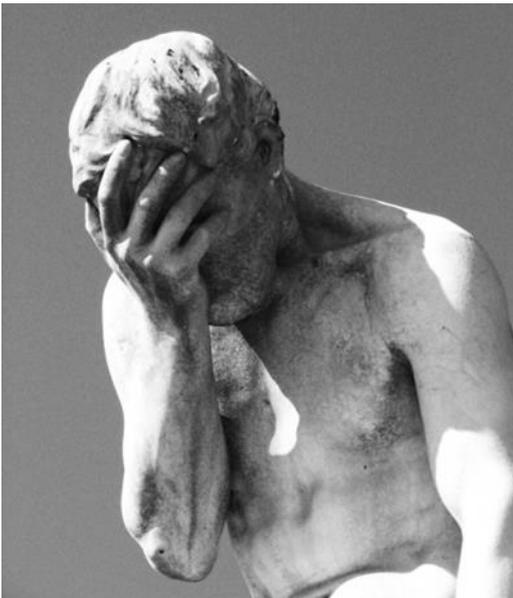
TO START YOU THINKING...

The problem of suffering

'Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?' (Job 2:10)

Last year my friend Sally died of motor neurone disease. She was 43, a midwife with two teenage daughters, and the disease had taken five years from diagnosis to end (the average life expectancy rate for sufferers of MND, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis as it is often known outside the UK). Sally was nothing if not organised, and nine months before she died she planned her funeral service. She asked me if I would give the address. I was both horrified and deeply honoured. Horrified that someone so lovely and young and alive should be in this position of contemplating her own death, and honoured because Sally was very special to me and many others. And both of those feelings too, I guess, because to speak at all of belief in the face of so much suffering, especially to a family who were not Christians, demands either someone very skilled or very foolhardy - and I was very much the latter.

For the question in everyone's mind at such an occasion, believers and non-believers alike, must be 'Why?' What kind of God would allow the horrible creeping paralysis of MND? I would love to have been able to give a full and convincing answer to such a question, but of course I couldn't. It is my question too. However, I do think there are some explanations to be had. One of them runs something like this:



God made us very remarkable creatures. We have the capacity to choose. We have the capacity to understand the difference between good and evil and the freedom to choose between the two. And, so the argument goes, God couldn't create a world where humans have free choice without creating a world in which both good and evil were at work. If everything were pleasant, if everything were easy, what sort of moral choices would we need to make? Would we need to be unselfish, or compassionate or courageous? Would we need to take action to make the world a better place, or develop our understanding to try and find a cure for MND? If everything in life was easy, would we be any more than automatons, or chickens scratching round in the dirt? It's incredibly difficult to understand suffering, but if you try to imagine a world without it you may find it equally difficult.

So I do think there is a rational argument to be made, but I'm aware that when faced with the pain and indignity of MND - or cancer, or Parkinson's disease, or dementia, or any number of other appalling illnesses the best response may simply be to shut up, as the ancient story of Job demonstrates!

Often all we can say in the face of such suffering is that we just don't understand. The important thing, though, and what Job understood, is that we say it to God. We don't just turn away cynically and assume faith is nonsense and there's no one up there and there's no meaning. One wonderful thing about the Bible is that it shows us it's okay to tell God how we feel. The book of Psalms in particular is full of cries from people who just didn't understand what God was up to and were prepared to tell him so.

Round about the time Sally was first diagnosed, I organised a sort of meditative service at our church, on the theme of life as a journey. At each of the different prayer stations was a verse from the Bible, and people were invited to take a copy of this away with them. One of them was from the very familiar Psalm 23: 'Even if I go

through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me.’¹ Sally took this little sheet home and stuck it on her fridge. When I visited and saw it there for weeks and months afterwards, I began to get a little worried. It’s all very well to give someone a comforting text, but when they’re going through shadows as deep and dark as Sally’s, what if it turns out to be false comfort?

I need not have worried. At her funeral another friend read some words that Sally had prepared especially for this purpose. Nine months before she died, she dictated:

During this time my Christian faith has been tried, tested and pummelled, yet despite the odd waver along the way, I know that God has been there throughout and I feel so wowed by his amazing grace. I wish everyone could feel as in awe as I did on the evening I dictated this.

Sally did not always feel ‘wowed’. She was an ordinary, honest person who felt anxieties for her family, frustrations with health-service provision, and a struggle with daily living that felt like an endless slog up a steep mountain - and yes, sometimes God seemed absent. But mostly she was aware of God’s presence with her and carried in herself a peace and gratitude that spilled over to all who visited. So though I cannot explain suffering, seeing Sally’s experience and that of many other believers like her, I can affirm that where there is trust in God, suffering can be transformed.

In 2009 a group of atheists (Richard Dawkins again), backed by the British Humanist Association, started what was called the Atheist Bus Campaign. Several London buses could be seen with the slogan ‘There’s probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.’

Quite apart from the many ironies contained in that ‘probably’, the slogan has another word that to writer Francis Spufford is an absurdity.



I’m sorry - enjoy your life? Enjoyment is great. The more enjoyment the better. But enjoyment is one emotion Life just isn’t unanimous like that The implication of the bus slogan is that enjoyment would be your natural state if you weren’t being worried by us believers and our hell-fire preaching. Take away the malignant threat of God-talk and you would revert to continuous pleasure under cloudless skies. What’s so wrong with this apart from being total bollocks?

Spufford describes some of the desperate Londoners who might see this bus pass by, some of the many trapped by poverty, addiction, illness and fear, for whom enjoyment is just a dream.

Let’s be clear about the emotional logic of the bus’s message. It amounts to a denial of hope or consolation, on any but the most chirpy, squeaky, bubble-gummy reading of the human condition. St Augustine called this kind of thing ‘cruel optimism’ fifteen hundred years ago and it’s still cruel.

No, life is not all enjoyment. There’s some tough stuff going on out there and very few of us are going to escape it completely. So the Christian message, unlike the atheist one, acknowledges this toughness and tells us that there is hope and consolation. It tells the extraordinary story of a God who suffers with us - and for us. No, we can’t explain it. Yes, we can and should rail against it sometimes - God’s shoulders are broad enough to take it. In fact, perhaps it’s only after we’ve railed at God a bit that out of the painful silence will come the awe. Only then we can begin to say: ‘Father, we don’t understand you, but we trust you,’ and go on to discover that God does not forsake us.