

Via Dolorosa: Suffering as a Theme of Christian Preaching

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Shortly after Jane Towner, my wife, became the director of a hospice program in Richmond, she brought back the sobering report that on the average it takes each one of us two and one-half years to die.

If all the suffering which faces the members of a congregation were confined simply to the aggregate of those individual two-and-one-half-year terminal periods, the cumulation would be massive. But to that figure must be added the innumerable forms of human suffering that are not life-threatening but which face people daily in a profoundly real way: the exquisite anguish suffered by those with phobias and obsessive fears (said to include more than one of every ten persons in the community); the lifelong struggles of the physically and mentally handicapped to find and keep their places in the community; the almost universal suffering of adolescents whose historic confrontation with acne and the opposite sex is now compounded with the moral revolutions of our times. And all of this touches only on individual suffering, without even taking account of the collective *angst* of our age which hangs like a mushroom-shaped cloud over every single one of us, and which takes a toll that no one has as yet been able to calculate.

Every working theologian knows these things. Every pastor feels the scope of the suffering "out there" each week as she or he arises to lead the people of God in worship, in prayer, the singing of hymns, and the exposition of Scripture. She or he knows that the way of suffering (*via dolorosa*) which sooner or later all human beings must walk is nothing new, and that the ancient symbols of our faith actually posit the fundamental nature of suffering. Our religion is signed with a cross, and we pray in words going back to the very beginning, "O Lord, grant us Thy peace," "Deliver us from evil," and even, "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?" Surely one of the primary functions of preaching is to offer to the community and the individual alike frameworks within which to place suffering, and to do so prophylactically, so that those who are going to suffer will have available to them a means of understanding their plight before their anguish takes them beyond the capacity to reason freshly.

I am a theoretician who sits in pews more than I stand in pulpits. You who are parish ministers hold more heads and kneel by more beds than do I. Yet, from the vantage point of one who has been granted time for reflection and observation, let me offer some suggestions about what can be said about suffering, beginning with three things which cannot be said.

1) *God did it to you.* No interpreter of the Christian faith has any business saying this even to the most rancid renegade of the community.

The *Texas Monthly* of April, 1980 (Vol. 8, No. 4, pp 86-89) carried the story of Orville Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth was an epileptic Marine veteran and former alcoholic who once wrote a letter to the newspaper supporting the plan of some men of Queen City, Texas, to establish a VFW post in spite of the opposition of local ministers who publicly accused the VFW and American Legion posts of being nothing but "outlets for alcohol." The day after Hollingsworth's letter was published, just after his two daughters had left him to fetch lunches, the abandoned house on his property which the family had been tearing down, fell on Hollingsworth and crushed him. The following Monday, the minister and a colleague invaded the VFW meeting and made this statement: "Let me give you food for thought. [My brother here] stands against liquor and not the VFW. The last man to contradict his stand in the newspaper is dead. Read the obituaries. Be careful what you do." Later on the minister confirmed that he had been referring to the death of Orville Hollingsworth by remarking, "There have been those who stood against God and God's people, and God got them out of the way." Even Orville Hollingsworth's widow, Jane, bought into the basic approach taken by the minister. Said she, "God punished David by killing his son. I don't know why He took Orville, but if He had wanted to punish him, He would have taken one of my daughters. They all three worked out there together."

Such an approach to suffering is not only nonsensical, but it refuses to take seriously the biblical witness to God's love for sparrows, saints, and sinners alike.

2. *It happened by pure chance.* As her pastor, I might have been tempted to say to Jane Hollingsworth, "The reason why Orville died was that termites had gotten the buildings ready to fall at just that moment." In a pile of newspaper clippings which I collect as evidence of the way in which people interpret suffering and tragedy is a picture of a car teetering on the edge of nothingness. It was taken just after the bridge across Tampa Bay collapsed in May, 1980. The driver of the car was quoted as saying, "The Lord was real good to the four of us." Of course he said that, and you and I might have said something like that, too. But the real reason that he rather than the driver just ahead of him stopped is this: he had good brakes and instantaneous reaction. To the lady of northern Virginia who found a meteorite lying on her table where only hours before the family had gathered for dinner one would be tempted to say, "You escaped this utterly random disaster by pure chance." That, too, would be a true and faithful saying. But the fact remains that believers have and will always have a hard time with the concepts of random event and pure chance. Although this way of speaking about suffering is fairer to God and to people alike than the first, there is still a feeling of ruthless coldness about it which falls short of providing comfort and help to those who are suffering.

3. *God's ways are unfathomable.* This, too, is true, and Scripture itself affirms it from time to time. The Book of Ecclesiastes as a whole is confident that God is doing something in the midst of the suffering and injustice that is visible in the world, but the preacher is unable to say exactly what! Still, everything else in Scripture encourages us to address the problem of suffering with answers better than that. "God's ways are inscrutable" is a bromide which has

been in use among us every day since at least the time of Job's friends. And yet even Elihu, the last of those friends, could no more leave the matter at that than Job himself could. "The Almighty—we cannot find him," said Elihu, but he continued, "He is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate" (Job 36:23). That much we know—and that much makes a big, big difference!

Having identified two of popular religion's most common interpretations of suffering, together with one which the secularist in each one of us can own today, let me now propose a three-part response to the problem of suffering which is more adequate both humanly and scripturally speaking and which can serve to factor out aspects of preaching on the subject of human suffering.

1. *God has placed us in the midst of an intricate system of orders.* Once again, the Wisdom tradition, and particularly the Book of Ecclesiastes, fuels our thinking: "He who digs a pit will fall into it; and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones is hurt by them; and he who splits logs is endangered by them. If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, he must put forth more strength; but wisdom helps one to succeed" (Eccl. 10:8-10). The preacher is talking here about what some have called "destiny-producing deeds." The things which we do unleash chains of events which eventually come around to us again. This cause-and-effect sequence takes place within a world of orders. The orders are set from the beginning by God. Nothing takes place outside of this framework of God's loving care; and human work and striving succeed only if they recognize the orders, the inner and outer limits which God has placed on our autonomy. The Wisdom tradition speaks about the outer limits in texts such as Proverbs 21:31: "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the Lord gives the victory." Think about that. A warrior has to get the horses ready, and there will be no victory without that preparation. Still, it is God who gives the victory. There is a mysterious intersection here between what we do and the rules and the orders of the universe which God has set up. And yet, within that universe which is upheld by God's providential care, we have responsibility and even a degree of autonomy. God is not going to intervene when in fact we are responsible for our own activity. Another proverb puts it this way: "By wise guidance you can wage war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Prov. 24:6). That one leaves God out, and yet one thing follows another inexorably, according to the orders.

Apply these observations of the biblical sages to the problem of human suffering. Why do people suffer? Some suffer as a consequence of decisions which they, as mature and responsible persons, have taken; others suffer the consequences of their irresponsible actions, or those of others. Yet others suffer because they got accidentally caught in the working-out of megaforges—in an earthquake or a tornado or a collision of celestial bodies. We live in an intricate web of orders in which God does not intervene directly, but in which certain consequences follow certain causes as inevitably as night follows day.

2. *God is Emmanuel.* Suffering may have arisen in an individual instance because of the inevitable consequences of choices that were made, or it may appear simply to be the result of disease randomly contracted or an accident

involving another person's folly. But we are not left alone to suffer. God is not over here on our side helping us to endure. Once again Job speaks to the question. Take the very figure of Job himself. He was the man to whom all blessings should have flowed. He was the man of whom Psalm 1 was speaking when it said, "Happy is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . in all that he does, he prospers." Precisely this man spends most of his book sitting on a dunghill scratching his boils and denying the premise of his friends that he must have sinned somewhere, and that his suffering, which looks for all the world like punishment, was the inevitable result. Job himself accuses God of afflicting him, not punitively but as an exercise of sheer arbitrary power. But all of the characters of the book are proved wrong when God, the creator of the cosmic order, and the lover of Behemoth and Leviathan, appears as Emmanuel and assures Job by his appearance that he cares. When Job recognizes this, he cries, "I had heard of you by hearsay, but now my own eyes have seen you; so I recant and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5, Pope's translation).

In these two teachings the popular theology of retribution is confounded, and the secular explanation of suffering as random event is overcome as well. Things happen according to the good orders which God has established. When a cancer metastasizes, what follows is predictable and sure. The suffering which ensues is neither a punishment, nor is it a purely secular event, for God is present with the sufferer, and suffers and loves on his part, too.

3. *Suffering can occasion faithful response.* This third component of the more adequate theological treatment of the matter of suffering is beautifully illustrated in John 9, the story of the man born blind. Jesus denies the usual premise of popular religion that the man's blindness was a punishment for somebody's sin, but affirms that it provides an occasion in which "that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). The blind man was, of course, fortunate that he had encountered the Healer himself and God was glorified in him through the healing of his blindness. But even for those sufferers whose burden is never removed, the option remains the same—the suffering can become an occasion for faithful response. It may in fact be for them (us) the only viable option. Any other direction moves toward the tragic and absurd.

Put these three teachings together and the picture looks like this: We are on our own as mature, responsible people living in a world of orders in which effect follows cause, in which accidents do happen, and in which we do have to make day to day decisions and live by their consequences. God is not over there inflicting suffering on us, but is standing here on our side to help us steer our courses. And when tragedies and accidents, disease and death do happen, as they surely will, then God and we together have the opportunity to respond to them in a way that does credit to the human spirit and glorifies God.

When the preaching and the praying of the church turn to the question of suffering, we have always also to point to the man on the cross. This Jesus, who acted maturely and responsibly, who seized every opportunity to redeem a bad situation, who was quick to jump over to the side of the one who was sick or blind or sinful, who sought God's guidance and strength in prayer, who approached human suffering in a non-retributational way, who did not interpret

the death of his friend Lazarus in terms of reward and punishment but wept and went in fighting to try to help him—this man had to walk along a *via dolorosa*. And yet God vindicated him, and showed his way of suffering to be the very way of Emmanuel, God incarnate in our midst.

It seems appropriate to try to sketch out the kind of life-posture that flows from a non-retributational outlook on human suffering and that refuses to ask the question, “God, why did you do that to me?” Such a life does not expect miracles, but does expect, through prayer for maturity and responsibility, to find the strength to keep on keeping on. When trouble comes, as it surely does, such a life accepts responsibility for its own part in the trouble. It acknowledges the possibility that suffering may arise for reasons that are, in part, random and accidental. It does all it can to fight against the things that can be fought against—the termites, the structural defects, disease, hunger, genetic illness, and fear—relying on God’s strength and encouragement. Such a life trusts God to be incarnate, and to be near as friend and helper, even as Emmanuel. And finally, when the time comes to die, such a life acknowledges that in death too there is an opportunity to glorify God and to testify that through Christ God will indeed overcome the burden of sin, the stain of decay, and the sting of death.

The bottom line of all theology is prayer. Here is a prayer which seeks to epitomize the threefold attitude toward suffering which this essay seeks to advance in place of either the retributational outlook of popular religion or the bleak despair of secular positivism.

O God, Creator and good keeper of the world and author of human freedom, give us the courage necessary to live and to minister in the midst of so much suffering. Give us the maturity to manage our own lives and not to curse you in the midst of distress. Above all, O God, give us that keen awareness of your intimate presence with us, so that we can respond to joy and to suffering, to good and to evil, in ways that glorify you, and so write new chapters in the history of salvation. In the name of him whose title is Emmanuel, God with us, Amen.