

St Mary's Church Langley



Sermon Series for Lent 2009

'A Christian Response to Suffering & Evil'

Sermon 1 – David Tawney, 1st March

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

There has been much suffering thrust before our eyes these last weeks: the bush fires in Australia, the destruction of the homes of Palestinians living in Gaza and of Israelis hit by the rather puny Hamas rockets, of babies and small children abused or neglected by parents, of those afflicted by our recent snows and floods. How do you respond? Why does all this happen?

Do you remember the Beslan school massacre? It began when a group of armed terrorists, demanding an end to the Second Chechen War, took more than a thousand people mostly children hostage in September, 2004, at a school in the town of Beslan, in southeast Russia. On the third day of the standoff, Russian security forces stormed the building using tanks and other heavy weapons. A series of explosions shook the school, followed by a fire and a chaotic gunbattle between the hostage-takers and Russian security forces. Ultimately, over 300 hostages were killed, including 186 children. Hundreds more were wounded or reported missing. The hostage-taking was carried out by Chechen rebels who were fighting for independence. Why be reminded of all this you may? Because it is sadly typical of similar, less publicized incidents, although larger in scale than most. It also involved children.

In an interview on BBC Radio 4 about the Beslan school massacre, Archbishop Rowan Williams was asked by John Humphreys: ‘Where was God in all this?’, surely a question many must have asked, so horrific it was. The Archbishop replied that God was certainly there, in the care that some of the children had for each other and in the sharing and caring of the mothers for each other.

In a letter in *The Church Times*, the writer, a retired priest called Ron Ingamells wanted more:

‘I wanted to hear that God was *in* the pain, *in* the agony and *in* the trauma.... Surely the only omnipotence of God is the omnipotence of love (God is love) and we all know that the greater the love, the deeper the pain and hurt when love is overcome by evil. Unless we recognise the vulnerability of love and, therefore, the vulnerability of God, we continue to have an image of a God ‘out there’ and not a God within and between each person, sharing totally in the pain.

Timothy Rees’s hymn helps me (Ron Ingamells) to understand this:

God is love and he enfoldeth
All the world in one embrace;
Within unfailing grasp he holdeth
Every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then they find that self-same aching
Deep within the heart of God.'

It's (EH 364). We sang it three weeks ago.

I don't think Rowan Williams would disagree with the idea of God suffering in disasters. Off the cuff in a radio interview, anyone might give an inadequate answer. And Williams might have given a partial answer because he thought it would be more understandable to his listeners. However I find it comforting to think of God suffering in disasters whether or not directly due to our sins or someone else's, and it is comforting to think that in the incarnation God shares the pains of the evolving world with us.

However, in today's NT reading, St Peter talks of Jesus suffering only once: 'For Christ suffered for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God'. Not *in* the pain, *in* the agony and *in* the trauma of the Breslan disaster and presumably every disaster. Once. What are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

Christ's death on the cross and the events leading to it show that Christ suffered because of the world's wickedness. The view that God the Father suffered as well is controversial. Anger and exasperation at the Israelites' constant failures, to worship only him and show pity to the less fortunate, is easier to find in the Old Testament. However, he is recorded frequently as showing compassion to the Jews, having pity on them, forgiving them. His relationship with them is often shown as that of a father to his children, a loving father, and any parent knows that it is very natural to suffer with their children. There are many instances where God's suffering alongside the Israelites can be inferred, but to give just one example, '... he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer ...' (Judges 10:16) indicates that he was suffering too.

In the New Testament, Jesus makes it clear that his purpose is to reveal what the Father is like: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.' Such is the closeness of the Trinity that it is difficult to see how all three persons cannot share in Jesus' intercessions for us and sincere intercession involves suffering.

My own view is that God suffers at the times when we suffer, and when we sin, particularly when, as it so often does, this causes others to suffer. He is in very close contact with us and loves us. Nowadays many will share this view of a suffering God but this has only been so in the last two centuries. In the early church and throughout the Middle Ages, the idea that God suffers was seen as contrary to the idea that God was perfect and unchangeable: if he suffered, how could he be perfect? The idea of the close involvement of God with human affairs, particularly with those of his chosen people, Israel, comes from the Bible but the early church was influenced as well by the ideas of Greek philosophers such as Plato. To them, almost by definition, God was sublime, eternally perfect. This meant he couldn't change because perfection would then either be lost, or, if it were gained, God couldn't have been perfect in the past. That God couldn't by his nature suffer caused problems when considering the crucifixion but most early writers asserted that it was only the human side of Jesus that suffered. However, eventually there were challenges to the idea, the most celebrated being by Martin Luther in his theology of the cross.

However, the idea of a god who is continuously suffering still has problems, if rather different ones. In the letter to the Hebrews, believed to have been written by close followers of Paul if not the Saint himself, a contrast is made between human high priests who enter the holy of holy of the temple every year to make an animal sacrifice and Jesus who was sacrificed once. 'Because of that he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.' That is, one sacrifice on the cross, as our NT reading states, but continuous intercession for us. And intercession made by a loving being demands suffering, suffering in response to our sufferings whether these are due to our sins, or to the sins of others, or to the processes of this evolving world – processes geological in natural disasters or biological in disease and disability.

Another problem is that most of us think of heaven as a place of happiness, of bliss where we will become closer to God and be re-united with our loved ones. What change will there be from this earth if we find God suffering and find ourselves suffering with him, looking back at those we have left in this imperfect world?

That I cannot explain how God suffers and reigns in glory at the same time is not surprising. Some find solutions from the Book of Revelation and other books, from passages which I regard certainly as true in an important way but not literally. My responses just reflect the poverty of human imagination.

To say it is *impossible* is to deserve the rebuke that God gave to Job when he questioned his designs:

‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.’

As they say, all will be revealed in God’s time!

In the meanwhile, I believe that God can suffer and does suffer in the present day, and suffers when I suffer. This gives me great comfort. I hope similar ideas give comfort to you.

Let us pray:

God, I can never understand you – but I can try to love you and wonder at the depth of darkness that you entered on the cross and the depth of the love that holds you there. Amen

Sermon 2 – Robin Grayson, 8th March

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Last week David Tawney began our sermon series for Lent under the title, ‘A Christian Response to Suffering & Evil’: Why this topic? Why now? It’s not exactly a cheery subject, so perhaps Lent is a good time to attempt it; for Lent is a time when we should be wrestling, like Jesus in the wilderness, with difficult questions about how we live as Christians.

There are tough questions that people throw at us, or indeed that we ask ourselves: why does God allow so much suffering and evil? why doesn’t he do something about it? Such questions come up every time we hear news of some fresh natural disaster or act of terror or case of child abuse; they are questions I get asked a lot, especially by Christians: How do I cope? How can I help others? How do I answer those who challenge my faith, who say that faith makes no sense when the world is in such a mess?

I’ve been helped a lot in my thinking about this by two very different books that I have read recently: One is ‘The Shack’, which you’ll find on the best-seller shelves at W H Smith; it is William Young’s first book, a fantasy novel, describing the pain and questioning of a man who has lost his daughter – surely one of the hardest things for anyone to bear! The other is quite a serious academic book, not a best-seller; it is ‘Raging with Compassion’ by John Swinton, a much-published professor at the University of Aberdeen.

What both these books offer, in their different ways, is not an intellectual justification for the presence of suffering and evil in our world, but help in living with that reality.

In his book, John Swinton examines closely the practice of ‘theodicy’, that is, the intellectual defence of the love, goodness and power of God in the face of evil and suffering. Theodicy seeks to answer the argument that either God does not care about our situation (so he is not good or loving), or that he is unable to do anything about it (so he is not all-powerful). Swinton’s case is that theodicy is both theologically flawed and practically useless; that such arguments are unfaithful to Christian and biblical witness and of no help to those in need.

Theodicy in its modern form is a direct result of our relative *freedom* from suffering. Former generations took suffering – e.g. infant mortality – as a given, it was just the way the world is; now the death of a child from illness is seen as a violation of nature, simply because we have such power over it. To quote from Swinton’s book, ‘The modern age is the first in which impotence and suffering are not the taken-for-granted and normal state of affairs for human beings’.

It is just because suffering no longer appears an inevitable part of life, that we start to ask all these questions; and then it is easy to get drawn into a theological debate about the origins of suffering and evil – it’s down to the devil’s wiles, or to human sin, or to God’s desire to test our faith – trying somehow to justify God in the face of this reality.

It’s easy, but profoundly unhelpful to anyone actually going through the agony of bereavement or terminal illness or famine or flood; when we are in the middle of it all, we don’t need answers to philosophical questions, but ways of getting through. In other words, for us as Christians, the existence of suffering and evil is not a *problem to solve*, but a *reality to live with*, by God’s grace.

Hence the title of this series is, ‘a Christian **response** to suffering and evil’, not ‘a Christian **answer**’ to it: How do we as Christians live with it? Where and how do we see God at work in it? What resources are there to help us through the times of crisis? How can we be of help to those in need? That is, we are asking about practical and pastoral issues, rather than engaging in intellectual debate: that is the thrust of this sermon series.

I’ve mentioned the influence of two books, but people have influenced me profoundly too: I have spoken before of the deep impression that was made on us by Sudanese refugees we met in Kenya a few years ago; they had suffered so much, through the long civil war, being driven from their

villages, suffering bereavement, hunger and disease, in ways that we can hardly imagine. Yet their faith in God was so strong, it shamed us comfortable Europeans. They were not asking, ‘How can God let this happen to us?’; but instead, ‘How will God help us now, as he has in the past?’

I was reminded of this attitude by one old lady in Beaconsfield, near to death, saying: “People ask me, ‘how can you believe in a loving God in a world full of suffering and evil?’; but I want to ask, ‘how can you cope in such a world, without faith in a loving God?’”

So, what does God do in response to suffering and evil? and what does our Christian faith offer us, to help us through it? Above all it is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as we read in Romans today: Christ suffered for our sakes and is now raised to God’s right hand. That is, he experienced in full the suffering and evil of our world and then showed that these do not have the last word; that, however dark things may seem to be, in the end God’s love will overcome. This was part of what David was saying to us last week: the fact that God shares in our sufferings may not answer all those philosophical questions about the origin and nature of evil; but it is a tremendous help and comfort in the midst of trouble.

There is a current caricature of Christian faith, that depicts Christians with heads firmly stuck in the sand, shielding themselves from reality with glib answers and the delusion of God’s protection. But the picture of faith that Paul paints in Romans is not one of neatly packaged answers to life’s questions, but one of hanging on to God, in trust, however things appear. That is the example that Abraham sets us, in his faith in God’s promise of a son even in his old age.

And when we turn to the Gospel of Mark, that pivotal moment which sets Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem and the cross, we find Jesus challenging their thinking, not to see things in human terms but with a divine perspective. Faith, and following Jesus, are not going to be a recipe for ease and comfort; we are not going to be spared suffering or protected from evil. Rather we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and even lose our lives for his sake. We can do this with hope, and in trust, because Jesus has gone ahead of us; he blazed the trail, and shown that God’s love does indeed have the final victory, despite all appearances to the contrary.

Those who attended a Lent Group this last week will perhaps be making connections with the theme of that first session: setting our ‘compass’ for the journey, the direction of our life, which is to come to the Father through Jesus.

As we do so, we find that God is not distant or detached from the suffering and evil of our world, but in Christ is fully immersed in it; it is here that he meets with us, here that he walks with us, and here that he calls us to hold out that hope to others.

I'd like to end with story of *The Shack*, that will show why this is such a powerful and popular book, even (perhaps especially?) for those with little or no faith of their own. It is about Mack – a devout Christian – whose daughter is killed in tragic circumstances. In the midst of his Great Sadness, as he asks, 'Where is God in a world of pain?', he is invited to meet God in the very shack where his child was last known to be. Whether this encounter with God is 'real' or a dream or a vision, doesn't matter; Mack comes away from his 'weekend with God' not with glib answers to his tortured questioning, but with a sense of healing, acceptance and hope; and he's even begun to forgive his child's murderer.

That sense of hope surely is what we would want for ourselves, and to be able to offer to others in their need, as we strive to be faithful to Christ through all the struggles of life.

References: *'The Shack'*, by William Young, Windblown Media, 2008

'Raging with Compassion', by John Swinton, Eerdmans, 2007

Sermon 3 – Robin Grayson & Mary Hough, 15th March

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

A young couple had a son with short-gut syndrome, a condition that prevents nutrients being absorbed and is often fatal; though the child survived, his health was a constant source of anxiety and required frequent hospital visits. The couple's fundamentalist Christian community informed them that the baby's illness was punishment from God for their sin – for the child had been conceived and born out of wedlock; we can only imagine the effect on them – both on their faith and on their care for their son – of having this additional burden of guilt laid upon them.

This true story illustrates the dangers of 'theodicy', that is, trying to justify God, giving arguments why God is not to blame for the way things are. It shows how doing this, far from helping, may actually result in even greater evil and even deeper suffering. That's why this Lent series is on a Christian *response* to suffering and evil, not a Christian *answer* to it; that is, we are not aiming to explain the state of the world, but looking for ways to help us to live in it, as well as possible.

So, how does *our* faith affect the way we cope with what happens to us? Is it a help, or does it make things harder? Even if we don't, in this church, place that sort of burden of guilt on each other, we may well as individuals place it on ourselves, imagining that when things go wrong we are somehow to blame. Yes, we do have to live with the consequences of our actions, which may sometimes be painful; but God is not in the punishment business! So, if that's not right, how do we respond? How can we find in our faith, not further pain or blame, but help in living well?

The focus today is on our own personal situation; next time we will look at what we can offer to others. This week I shall ask Mary Hough to tell us how she has coped with recent events in her life; then later [Sermon 4] Marion Overton will share some thoughts from her experience as a GP, seeking to bring her Christian faith to bear in these issues.

As I said last week, at the heart of any Christian response to suffering and evil is the cross of Christ; it is there that God has defeated evil, dealt with sin, and started the unstoppable movement towards the fulfilment of his kingdom; it is in the wounds of Christ that suffering is redeemed and the healing of the world's hurts is begun. That's all standard Christian stuff, but it is important that we appreciate how odd and illogical it is; it is not what we would have done, and it is not obviously effective: evil still seems to be on the increase, and people still suffer greatly.

We read in 1 Corinthians, 'the message of the cross is foolishness' to those who don't get it. Our natural tendency is either, like the Greeks, to look for 'wisdom', that is, logical explanations that will answer all our questions; or, like the Jews, to look for some powerful intervention, where God will step in and sort things out for good and all.

What God does instead looks like weakness and stupidity, like someone intervening in a fight in the street, and getting beaten up themselves – what good does it do? But this is what God does, and if his response to suffering and evil is strange, unexpected, or counter-intuitive, then perhaps ours must be as well. Maybe people won't 'get' it, and will call us weak and foolish too. What this requires of us is an *act of faith*, the faith that, in the end, as Paul says, 'God's foolishness is wiser than our wisdom, and his weakness stronger than our strength'. What might such acts of faith look like?

In John Swinton's book, 'Raging with Compassion', he gives the example of prisoners in Auschwitz concentration camp, trying to resist the evil and despair around them through simple acts of justice and kindness.

While their guards would routinely deprive them of most of their meagre bread ration, amongst themselves, the prisoners were meticulously fair in sharing out what remained, down to the last crumb. Did such acts spare them the gas chambers? No, but they bore witness to values of love and goodness that no cruelty could defeat. Victor Frankl, one of the few Auschwitz survivors, wrote that, ‘everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the freedom to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstances’

One on a smaller scale – rather poignant given this week’s tragedy in Germany – is the story of Cassie Bernall, one of the students killed by neo-Nazi gunmen at a school in Colorado in 1999. As they put the gun to her head they asked, ‘do you believe in God?’, she answered ‘yes’; then the killer laughed and pulled the trigger. That little word, ‘yes’, may not seem much; it did not save Cassie’s life, but it did turn on its head her killers’ pretence of power, and reaffirmed the faith and hope of evil ultimately defeated.

Our troubles may not be so life-threatening, but still they call us to similar acts of faith, which keep God in the centre, that refuse to give in to hopelessness or cynicism. And if that does mean having a good shout at God from time to time, we’re in good company: the Bible is full of people complaining to God and demanding justice. People often struggle with this idea, that it is alright to have a go at God, when things are going wrong. But surely it is much worse to leave God out, to give up on him, to imagine he doesn’t care? God may not be to blame for the mess we are in, but he does still take responsibility for the world. So we need to be more open and honest with God, and we need to be able to do it *together*.

John Swinton recalls a key moment for him: the day of the Omagh bombing, in August 1998, when the horror of death and destruction filled the TV screens. The following day he went to church, full of questions about how God could let such things happen, looking for help with the confusion and anxiety he felt. But the whole service went by without a single mention of the tragedy of the previous day. Somehow in that church the capacity to lament to God and to question God had been silenced; they had no way of dealing with such shock and sadness in the context of their faith.

Of course, it’s not a comfortable thing to do; certainly I have not found writing these sermons easy – I’d rather think happy thoughts about Jesus any day! But it’s something we need to be able to do as a church.

So, to draw things together: The first requirement, in the face of suffering and evil, is to hang on in faith, that this will not have the final word. But that does not mean suppressing our feelings or questions, but taking them to God in prayer and lament. It also does not mean pretending that everything is fine, but instead sharing our burdens with those around us, especially in our church family.

An interview with Mary Hough about her recent experience:

Mary, what has been happening in your life in the last couple of years?

I have been coming to St Mary's for almost 2 years – since the death of my husband. That was the worst thing that has happened to me – even taking into account breast cancer a couple of years before that. Since David died I have broken my ribs, been in hospital 3 times with damaged knees and a broken wrist, had a very challenging and stressful time at work (I am a Human Resources Manager and I deal with people and their problems on a daily basis). The latest thing that has happened to me is that I managed to start off 2009 by losing my home – something that David and I worked hard for over the years, but I could not keep it going without him – which I am *very* sad about; I feel as though I let him down.

So the past couple of years have been eventful – even for me!

*Over this time you have become a member of St Mary's, and been confirmed. But hasn't your faith been rather **challenged** by all that has happened to you?*

There have been times like everyone when I have been alone at night and thought, *why me? why me?* I seem to have had a series of events and struggles and just when I think I have got over something – a new challenge has been thrown at me. I have been so low at times that I have seriously wondered why I should go on – what for? what is the point? I can't say I have ever got angry with God, but I have felt more a sense of disappointment. I have felt that he doesn't always listen – can't he see I am not the strong person everyone thinks I am? I have tried so hard to be the Christian he would want me to be and I have had to ask him, why can't you let me have some peace and quiet? why all these challenges.? There are times when I *have* felt that he has been testing me to see if I can still hold true to my faith. I have even thought on at least one occasion “oh, being a Christian is just too hard. I give up!”. But it's not that easy to do.

How has your faith helped you through all this?

Well strangely, over the past couple of years all these challenges have actually helped me grow in faith. Each time something happens I think “oh here we go again” and I actually talk to God and ask him to show me what I need to do. God has become this “person” who lives inside me who is the one person who knows *everything* about me. I can’t hide from him and because of that I can talk to him about everything. He has taught me that everything can be overcome – not necessarily how you would want it to be – I didn’t want to lose David or my home – but from each bad thing that has happened something good (if that is the word) has come out of it. I have learned to be patient – to listen and realise that though I may be suffering there are other people suffering as much if not loads more. Whereas I was at first embarrassed to admit to friends and family that I had become a Christian, I am now more at peace with my faith and people have seen a change in my attitude, how I live my life etc. My faith has been a huge help in my job. My boss has come to depend on me. I have helped other people in their grief or when they have had challenges they feel they can’t cope with. It means I tend to always have someone wanting a piece of me, but I now feel that perhaps that is what God intended for me: to fill the emptiness with time for others. I think he has finally got through to me what he wants from me: to show others that my faith has made me stronger and to be more compassionate.

4. What part has church played in this?

Being part of the church has been a great help – it fulfils a need that family and friends don’t always understand. The friends I have made at church understand when I get a bit weepy and let me get on – whereas I always feel that family and “other” friends feel I should be getting past the need to cry now. There is a warmth in the church family that fills a “hole” in my heart and I feel quite panicky if I have to miss a Sunday. I need the spiritual fulfilment and being with my church family.

As Christians we are not spared suffering, but are called to ‘suffer differently’, because the meaning of our lives is different. It may look like weakness and foolishness, it may feel like walking on a tightrope over a pit of crocodiles, but it will be different as it always with hope.

We are people who recognise and take seriously the pain and sadness of this world, but refuse to be crushed by it; and we do this together, listening to one another and crying out to God together, carrying those who struggle, knowing that when our time of need comes, others will be there for us

Sermon 4 – Robin Grayson & Marion Overton, 29th March

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

This is now the fourth in our Lent series exploring ‘a Christian response to suffering and evil’. This is not a comfortable subject to dwell on, and it was certainly a welcome relief for me last week to be doing something a bit lighter for Mothering Sunday! and I know that some found parts of my last sermon on this subject tough going – but we can’t avoid it, these are difficult and painful matters, but they need to be faced!

To recap, briefly: We thought first about the difference between *offering answers* to the questions around suffering and evil – where does it come from? why does God allow it? etc. – and looking for *ways of responding* to the reality of it.

Then, last time I said that, when in trouble, we need to be *honest with God*, to keep him in the picture, to speak out our complaint and our lament to him, knowing that we are in the good company of many biblical characters, especially the writers of the Psalms. But also that we need to be *honest with one another*, for our response to suffering and evil is best found, not in isolation, but in community; and that we should engage together in *acts of faith*, in the face of evil and suffering, that refuse to give in to helplessness or cynicism, but affirm the hope that God’s way will have the final victory. One of those acts of faith is, of course, what we do in our Sunday worship, week by week, in our prayers and praises, our reading of scripture, our sharing of Communion – all of which remind us of the bigger story that we are part of, and put our troubles into that larger perspective.

So far this has been mostly about how we cope with the troubles in our own lives. Today and next week I want to focus more on what we can do for other people and for the wider world, to respond to, and resist, the presence of evil and suffering. I have invited Marion Overton to speak to us about her experience as a Christian GP in Langley over many years; I hope that will help us to see what we can offer to others out of our faith, in whatever context we meet them.

Here is what Marion said:

Do you think in pictures? My patients will be familiar with lots of diagrams drawn on scraps of paper!

Remember Nehemiah, supervising the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem? Dirty work – everyone was involved, and some weren't used to handling anything heavier than a pen. Difficult work – not many trained stonemasons involved. Dangerous work – Sanballat, Tobiah and their cronies first ridiculed the work, then planned to attack.

So what did Nehemiah do? Prayed, and then set a guard – someone armed with spear, shield or bow, to stand beside each worker. You can read the story in Nehemiah chapter 4.

Is there someone God is calling us to stand beside, while they are going through difficult or challenging times? What about the weapons? Ephesians chapter 6 describes our spiritual weapons: Prayer, faith, the word of God etc.

Please note that the One who stands beside does not need a stethoscope or prescription pad, or even a degree in counselling! They need to have their eyes open, keeping watch for attack. They face the horizon, and can offer the Christian Hope that comes from getting things in perspective.

How do you, as a Christian and a GP, offer hope to those in trouble, especially those with little or no faith of their own?

It's a privilege to be allowed to stand beside someone in need. I've already spoken about the "one who stands beside" having the detachment to get things in *perspective*, that is, God's perspective.

When I can take time out to lay a particular problem before God, I'm following the example of royalty – Jesus, King David, King Hezekiah. Then I can help to interpret what the sufferer is going through – not often in overtly Christian terms, but sometimes I can challenge what they believe life is about. Jonathon Sachs on Thought for the Day on Radio 4 spoke about seeing crises as a God-given *opportunity to grow*, as necessary steps on the way to becoming what God wants us to be.

How do you maintain your own sense of hope, and avoid getting overwhelmed by the troubles of others?

Yes, there can be a price to pay! There's a time to weep – not usually in front of patients! – and to acknowledge that things seem completely hopeless. Often it's when I'm overtired, so an early night, and then I may wake in the early hours, and experience the blessing of "the slow watches of the night", as the hymn puts it; a time for refocusing, praying – and then I'll sleep again.

If things seem completely black, I try to use the weapon God has given us, the weapon of Thanks and Praise – even if it’s only to thank God that things aren’t even worse! That means I’ve turned towards God again, and He is the God of Hope; after all, He used the suffering of Jesus to bring about the Redemption of the world.

As Peter puts it (1 Peter 1:3), ‘By His great mercy we have been born anew to a living Hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’

Today we read in John 12 Jesus’ words, ‘whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also’. It is Jesus who sets the example and shows the way, by his own words and actions, his life and his death; and who then calls us to the same path. Marion has shared how she tries to live this out in her own work.

What about us? Who is there – work, family, neighbour, friend – that God is calling us to stand alongside, and offer hope to? We may sometimes feel overwhelmed by the troubles of the world, whether those near to hand, or the bigger ones. But whatever the scale of the issue, as Christians we are always to have *hope*.

Indeed hope is one of God’s gifts to us, as Paul prays in Romans 15:13, ‘May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may abound in hope.’

Sermon 5 – Robin Grayson, 5th April

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

John 12:12-16

‘Would you save a stranger?’ This was the question put by a Channel 4 documentary the other night. It looked at five cases of assault in public places from the point of view of victims and bystanders – some of whom had intervened, while others had watched and done nothing. Particularly shocking to me were the youngsters attacked on buses by teenage gangs, where none of the adults on the bus did anything to protect them. On the other hand there were those who did step in, and risked the consequences – in one case paying the ultimate price, his own life. But what would you or I have done? ‘Would *we* save a stranger?’

These are very stark examples of the sort of choices we need to make every day, as we face the reality of suffering and evil in our world, and try to work out how to respond to it. On a less dramatic level, last Sunday Marion Overton shared with us how she responds as a Christian GP to her patients' needs; how she offers them hope, without herself being overwhelmed by their troubles. We thought about how we might apply this in our own situation, with the people we know.

Now, in the last of our Lent series, I want to turn from the local scene to the larger scale – questions of global finance, trade, poverty, climate change, war etc. – which are very much in the news, with the discussions that the G20 and NATO leaders had at their recent meetings.

When confronted by such huge issues, we may feel angry, fearful, frustrated, helpless: the systemic evils of oppressive governments, unjust trade rules, or selfish pollution of the environment, seem so far beyond our influence or control. The resulting suffering – children dying of preventable diseases, whole populations left starving or homeless by extremes of climate, or simply because they are unable to sell their goods at a fair price – is too vast to comprehend: How do we respond? How do we resist such evil or alleviate suffering on such a scale?

The temptations are either to turn to anger and violence – we saw evidence of that in some of the demonstrations in London this week. Or, perhaps more likely, to bury our heads in the sand, to pretend it's not happening, that we can't take any responsibility for it or make any difference to it. But neither of these is a Christian response. We must take notice, and do something, but what? Yes, we are called to prayer, of course, but also to *prophetic* word and action. What do I mean by that?

Take last weekend's march in London: There were 35,000 of us, a real mix of people and agendas, but for us 1500 Christians it was a *prophetic act*. That is, it was not just about putting pressure on the government, to try to get our way by shouting louder than anyone else; but rather speaking out, to reaffirm what we believe are God's values and God's ways of doing things, that we will not allow to be silenced by selfishness, cynicism or anger.

Did it make any difference? I did notice Gordon Brown using very much the same language as we'd heard in the service before the march, that decisions about global finance should show concern for the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. Would he have used such language if Christians had not been putting across the same message in a public way? It's hard to know for sure – but the important thing is that we do not do nothing. To quote Gordon Brown himself, 'we don't walk by on the other

side'; we don't avert our eyes from the 12 year old being beaten up on the bus, and do nothing to help!

I've mentioned before John Swinton's book, 'Raging With Compassion'. He reminds us of the *positive work* that has to be done in resisting evil, rather than remaining passive: We're all familiar with the quote, that goes back to Edmund Burke in the 18th century, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'. Swinton quotes examples of this, such as Nazi Germany where evil became rampant and systemic, because ordinary people turned a blind eye; they either refused to recognise what was going on, or didn't dare to speak or act against it.

What applies in our own spiritual lives – the need to notice what is happening and to be realistic about our condition – applies too in relation to the society in which we live. Martin Luther King said: 'he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it'. If nothing else, we might hope that our present financial crisis will wake us up to the evil and selfishness, which is endemic our social, financial and political structures, and remind us of our responsibility as Christians to resist it in whatever way we can.

But as well as resisting evil, there is also the matter of responding to it, once it has been done. A good example, often quoted, of such a response is in South Africa – the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, that gave a voice to those who had suffered under apartheid, and confronted the perpetrators with the consequences of their actions. I believe that such acts have great power, to take the sting out of evil by facing it and forgiving it. But is it fair? Does it not rather let the perpetrators off too lightly? What about justice? What about revenge? These are very natural questions.

This question of justice vs forgiveness is faced towards the end of the book which I mentioned earlier in this series, 'The Shack': Mack's daughter has been abducted and murdered. During his 'weekend with God' at the shack where she was last known to be, Mack comes to recognise his own failures and need of forgiveness, and then is brought to the point where he is being asked to forgive her killer; his reaction is not surprising:

'How can I forgive the man who killed my [daughter]? if he were here today ... I would want him to hurt like he hurt me ... if I can't get justice, I still want revenge'.

God answers him, 'Mack, forgiveness is not about forgetting ... it is about letting go of another person's throat ... for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him'.

Mack eventually understands that forgiveness is first for himself, the forgiver, to set him free from his anger, his bitterness, his desire for revenge; and then to free God to do his work in the other person.

Would we save a stranger? Maybe we would step in to help an ‘innocent victim’; but what if the stranger were our enemy, someone who had done wrong to us or to those we love? What then? This is where the Christian faith really begins to bite, because this is what we are called to, as disciples of Christ.

Today, on Palm Sunday, we enter Jerusalem with Jesus, Palms waving and hopes high, but through the week will have to face the depths of his suffering and the apparent triumph of evil; and in the midst of it all we will hear those words from the cross, ‘Father, forgive them’, and be confronted with our own need to forgive and be forgiven.

Would we save a stranger? Maybe not, but Jesus does; as Paul puts it in Romans 5, ‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’. We were strangers and enemies to God, but he still came to us in Jesus, offering us forgiveness and new life; ‘he emptied himself’, we read today in Philippians 2, ‘he took the form of a slave, and humbled himself, even to death on a cross’, and we are to be like him.

We do glimpse, of course, the light at the end of the tunnel, in his mighty resurrection, his bursting from the tomb on Easter Day. But meanwhile, there is still the darkness to go through with Jesus, and in that darkness we may begin to see how we must have a share in what he has done; for we are called to be, not merely passive recipients of his grace, but active disciples, imitators of him who laid down his very life for us and for the whole world.

To sum up this sermon, and this series: Our response as Christians to the suffering and evil that we experience in our own lives, and in the world around us, is to be one of *faith, hope* and *love*:

Faith – that God is with us in it and through it all.

Hope – in God’s ultimate victory over sin & suffering, evil & death.

Love – that leads us to lay down our own lives in imitation of our Lord and master: as we stand against evil, offering forgiveness to our enemies and help to those in need.

May God grant us the grace so to follow in the footsteps of his Son.