

Revd Marcus Zipperlen was challenged to write something to answer a question many may be asking at this time-

Why does God allow suffering?

If God is love and God is in charge, why is there so much suffering in the world? This question has troubled the hearts and exercised the minds of Christian people through the centuries. Why does God let so much bad stuff happen? Couldn't God stop it; order the world in a different way where there was less violence, less hatred, less injustice, less disease of body and mind, and fewer harmful accidents? Musing on these thorny issues some have concluded either God can't be in charge, or can't be love, or both, and lose their faith. Others argue God is in charge, but being human we just can't see the bigger picture: we shouldn't presume to understand God's ways, which must always remain a mystery, and enquiring shows a lack of faith. But is there not a way of both retaining our faith in a God of love and finding some answers to the questions that cry out from within? After all, Jesus encouraged us to love God with all our 'mind' as well as our heart (Matt. 22: 37), and declared the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13), so it's not necessarily impossible or unfaithful to seek answers to these questions.

One place to begin is precisely where many stumble: the biblical declaration that 'God is Love' (1 Jn 4:8). We know that love involves relationships of giving, sharing, and in its fullness the complete offering of oneself in service of another. The Christian recognition of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit helps us see this at the very heart of God. God is an eternal offering of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit; each offering all they are to the other (Jn 16:15; 1 Cor. 2: 10-11). So God is love, but God is not content merely to *be* love, to keep that blessing within, but rather desires to reach out and *share* that love with others. We see this clearly in the life of Jesus ('for God so loved the world that he sent his only son.... Jn. 3:16), and we see it active in the very creation of humanity. The first chapters of Genesis describe God creating the world and introducing to it creatures made in God's own image: us, reflecting God's nature, the essence of which is Love. We are made from God's overflowing love, and made for loving relationship with others (each other and God) so that we too can know love in its fullness.

So far, so good. We are made from and for love, which agrees with our view of God as love. But things get interesting when we start to probe into what makes love possible. And one of the essential ingredients for love is freedom. There can be no love without it. Who could believe or trust acts or words of love from someone under duress to declare them, or compelled to accept them? Loving relationships are predicated upon our freedom, and the ability to choose otherwise. We have no problem recognising the freedom of God. In fact, only God is truly free. Nothing coerces God, nothing causes God to act in one way or another against God's will. All is God's free choice. But Christians often shy away from naming human freedom because it can seem presumptuous to claim that privilege for

ourselves, especially where our freedom might seem to lessen God's sovereignty. But we can lay such reservations aside when we recognise that precisely in our freedom we are absolutely dependent on God's grace, for only God is free, and only God can share that.

To make us in God's image, so we can love as God loves, God also bequeaths us a share in divine freedom. Without that gift we could never experience the love that is God's intention. Automotons cannot love; earth, air, fire and water cannot love. Only creatures endowed with freedom can. Being made in the image of God, that staggering privilege we all share, of necessity involves participation in God's freedom. And what makes the gift of divine freedom so special is that we can use it to turn from God and serve ourselves, and all of us do to some extent. The whole sorry saga of human disobedience, beginning as early as the third chapter in the bible, bears witness to that.

And it is here, in recognising God's gift of freedom and our ability to misuse it, that we begin to see how God's untarnished gift of sharing his nature allows for the possibility for pain to exist in God's good world. Not because God ordains that it should, as a healthy dose of tough love, but because of good gifts misused. We can choose to hurt as well as love others, and we frequently do. God does not cause the pain that arises through human selfishness, we do. As a thought experiment we might imagine other possible universes in which life is arranged in ways that make us less likely to misuse our freedom, where God might intervene more frequently to steer us in the right direction. But it's not hard to see how in such a universe we could never reach the fullness of loving relationship that God longs for us experience for we'd be more puppets than participants.

So much pain results from human sinfulness. What about pain in the world that is not caused by human action but the 'natural world'? What about earthquakes, floods, 'accidents', disease? There is an element of human self-centeredness that makes all of these occurrences worse. Greed and complacency cause people to live on floodplains or in the shadow of volcanoes, or increase the risk of disease through lack of care for each other. But there yet remains activities in the natural world that cause suffering without the help of humans. How can these 'natural' events be in accordance with God's love? Well, for similar reasons to those we have explored.

For the creation to have its own existence, and not be merely an extension of God's self, it too is gifted a share in God's freedom, albeit in different ways to us. Animate life has been gifted agency, and inanimate matter the possibly for self-organisation, or simply the freedom to be itself. Without the independence of nature we could not meet, know, or love each other. If all the world conformed to your will how could I communicate with you? All matter would be in your control and not available for me to shape into sound, touch, or light. We need matter to be independent in order to meet and communicate. But, of course, independent matter might not always behave as we would want. If I build a wonky wall it might fall and crush me. I might wish that it didn't, but I'd be wishing away the possibility not only of building the wall but of knowing the person I was building it for. Or

thinking of our current predicament, the agency of viruses can come into conflict with our wellbeing, as we are dramatically experiencing, although the problem has been greatly amplified by human actions.

In case you are feeling uneasy about the seeming resistance of matter to God's will, such an understanding does not preclude the possibility of miracle. Because God is Love, God is non-coercive and un-controlling (for to be so would kill love). Miracles can happen, but they occur through a cooperation of God and Creature rather than unilateral action on God's part. Time and again in the gospels Jesus uses an individual's faith as the source their healing (Mk 5: 14, Lk 17: 19). Although non-coercive God is still almighty, as creator of all, sustainer of all, provider of all, giver of life and freedom.

So, what allows matter to be the setting where creatures meet and know each other, what allows God's creatures to express divine creativity and interdependence, what makes humans capable of expressing love, is God's gift of freedom. And that gift requires something of a 'letting go' by God, a willing surrender of total control of all that happens, a giving of space to live, grow and discover. And in that space pain and suffering can gain a foothold, be it caused wilfully by humans, unintentionally by God's less conscious creatures, or blindly by matter as it follows its own nature. Pain so caused is not God's direct will for us, but it is consistent with God's nature and intent that God's creatures should share in the fullness of God's love. To love, one must be free, but freedom involves the possibility of injury and pain. That there is pain in the world need not remain utterly mysterious to us, neither does it impugn the nature of our loving God, but rather demonstrates it.

It must be said that such arguments may go some way to satisfying that part of our nature requiring explanation, but when we are suffering they can seem wholly inadequate, and leave our hearts and emotions untouched. When we are in pain we don't so much want an explanation as comfort and relief. But in our more settled moments if we don't have reasons to hand for why suffering revisits us so often doubts about God's love grow and faith is weakened.

Finally, our un-controlling God of love does not leave us to suffer pain alone, saying "I've done all I can to make the world a place where you can experience love, now it's over to you". God, as we know, comes alongside and suffers with us, as Christ has shown. Paradoxically, the place of suffering is also a place of God, a place where God can meet us and offer grace and love. Not that it would be our first choice of location to converse with God. But nonetheless when we are there, God is there too. For which, thanks be to God.