

Suffering – 19.3.23

This morning is the 4th in our Lent series and the subject is Suffering. Our reading is the whole of one chapter of John's gospel and is the episode of Jesus healing a blind man. The healing itself is recorded in just 2 verses but the reaction to both the blind man and his healing is contained in the other 39 verses.

I am sure each one of us here this morning can relate to suffering both personally and in relation to others and I am equally certain that not one of us would say I have never asked the question why, why, why. Suffering takes many shapes whether in sickness or disability, bereavement or unemployment or being jilted. TV now throws at us the suffering of the world in such large doses that many of us are becoming almost immune to it. We've seen pictures of starving children so often now that we almost switch off mentally when we see another. It's a problem that can't be explained, it won't be ignored and it mustn't be exaggerated but it can't be explained.

There is no cheap slick answer to why there is suffering. A whole book of the bible is devoted to suffering in the book of Job. And yet Job was never told the reason why he suffered. There is a mystery in suffering and any answer does not take us far enough to know the whole answer. But God said quite a lot and we need to hold on to what He has said to take us as far as we can go in coping.

Let's go back to our passage. This blind man had never seen a thing. He had no concept of trees, the sky or people. Here is a miracle that is quite unique in the gospels because it deals with the healing of a congenital defect. There is no other case in the whole of Jesus miracles of someone born with a disability and then cured years later. It is quite unique. The first people to react are the disciples and they ask the question most asked of Christians and by Christians which is why does God allow suffering. It comes in many forms but it comes up again and again. When the disciples saw the poor blind man suffering, their interest was intellectual and philosophical. They wanted to discuss the whole question and debate it and they were more concerned with the question - where does it come from, what causes suffering, why does it happen and this is the question we are asked many times. It's interesting to note that it is rarely that the question is asked by the sufferer themselves. It is usually by relatives or friends or people who have seen it. Very rarely does the person themselves ask Why. Their concern is rather different – theirs is how to cope with or what to do about it. But those who witness it say Why. And the disciples say 'Lord was it due to this man's own sin or was it his parents sin that caused this suffering and that was their only concern to have this authoritative answer to Why. They were wrong of course that the cause had to be the sin of the man or his parents. They were right in believing that all suffering is due to sin but wrong in thinking that the person themselves had sinned or those nearest to them.

The biblical position is that all suffering is due to sin. However, that does not mean that if a person suffers they must have sinned. The book of Job is the answer to that one and we can nail that immediately. Some of the most godly and saintly people have suffered terribly and some of the most wicked have died peacefully in their own beds. You can't just equate suffering with sin in the individual's life but taking the suffering of the whole world and the whole human race the bible says all that is due to one thing and one thing only – sin.

There are 3 sources of sin. First there is some undoubtedly that comes to an individual because of their own sin. No questions are asked about this and no problems are raised. Here is someone who has drunk his liver to bits or smoked his lungs to bits. And they know it's the result of what they've done. The bible is quite clear that whatever we sow we shall reap. A great deal of suffering that one sees in later life is related to the way life has been lived earlier.

The second cause of suffering in the world is caused by the sins of other people. War is the most outstanding example. Aggression and cruelty leave in their wakes thousands upon thousands of people suffering. As we look out upon the world today we can see that a vast proportion of it is due to the sins of others.

There is still a third area of sin that does not relate to the sin of ourselves or to others. There are such things as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that seem quite unrelated to the sins of men or society. This is the nub of the question and the bible gives an answer. There is evil in this world which extends beyond the human race. There are intelligent beings in the universe who have also sinned apart from the human race. You may call them fallen angels or the devil or Satan but Jesus himself accepted this explanation. When a woman who was brought before Jesus who had been ill for 18 years, Jesus said 'you see this woman bound by Satan these 18 years'. Jesus cast out demons from the Gadarene into the swine and Job never knew that his suffering was the work of Satan.

In this passage Jesus rebukes his disciples. Jesus says there's a more important question than where does it come from and that is the question what is it going to lead to. He is saying stop treating this blind man as a case and treat him as a person. Stop looking at suffering as something to debate rather see it as something to do something about. Stop speculating and start acting. See suffering as an opportunity to do something because here will come a time when you can do anything about it and the suffering will end. So work for the night comes when no man can work. In other words when you come up against suffering don't say now this poses an interesting debatable question but say what can I do about it now while I can.

Then Jesus says a remarkable thing. It's an answer that may not commend itself to us at first sight but in vv3 Jesus says 'but that the works of God might be manifest in him'. Jesus is saying that suffering has a divine purpose. God is at work in and revealing his glory through our sufferings. That's the answer Jesus gives. It is an extraordinary answer and it hits us square between the eyes. It hurts and yet that's the answer that he gave. This has been allowed so that God's power may be seen. In other words, if you see suffering as an opportunity for a philosophical debate as it were it comes from but rather as an opportunity of bringing glory to God, you are going to approach it in a completely different way. Suffering is the means of blessing.

Well so far we've covered the first four verses of the passage. Let's pause here and listen to a meditation.

Now we come to the healing of the blind man and Jesus says what are we going to do about this blind man because while I am in the world I am the light for the world and here is a man in darkness and I must do something for him. We move from the disciples having their philosophical debate about suffering from an intellectual point of view, and Jesus saying don't debate – do. Here's an opportunity to manifest God.

The blind man's concern wasn't intellectual but practical. His interest was not suffering but sight. He was blind and he wanted to see. He in fact had the simplest attitude to the situation of anyone there. I am blind and I want to see. Jesus did an extraordinary thing he spat – but we've all done that to help healing. When you cut or burn your finger what's the first thing you do? Spit it can be

used to heal as well as to hurt. Jesus mixed his spittle with the clay dust to make mud and placed it on the man's face which would hold the spittle in place against his eyes for some time. Jesus did that but we notice again and again in the gospels that Jesus helps those who help themselves. He invariably gives them something to do to cooperate with him. He demands an active, not a passive faith. An active faith to the man lying on a bed, he says 'get up, take up your bed and walk'. You do something. It is the way of Jesus not to treat a person as a passive victim but to say let's do this thing together. So Jesus smeared the mud on his eyes and said now I've done all I'm going to do and you still can't see. Now you do your part. He told him to do an extraordinary thing. He told him to find his way over three quarters of a mile blind with mud smeared on his eyes to the pool of Siloam and wash in the pool. It achieved two things – firstly it tested that man's faith – whether he really believed it was worthwhile – to pick his way tapping his stick down through the streets to the pool. If he didn't believe it would work he wouldn't do it. It stretched his faith. It made him determined to want to see and in that pool he received his sight.

It also ensured a rather extraordinary thing. That when he did see, he couldn't see Jesus. That was part of the reason Jesus sent him all that way. If we look back to the previous chapter we see that Jesus was in danger of his life. They were ready to stone him for saying that he was God and to heal a blind man publicly in his presence so that the blind man would see and say 'here's the man who healed me' was dangerous and it was not yet time for Jesus to die. So when the blind man could see, he would never have recognised Jesus.

Interesting that's what happens when his neighbours and friends establish that this is their blind beggar who can now see. Once they've established it really is him, they lose interest in him and want to see the man who had done it and they switch from what had been done to who had done it. If the blind man had been able to find Jesus, Jesus would have had a tremendous crowd following him to see what would be the next thing he did. It was an emotional reaction to sensationalism and nothing more.

Then the Pharisees get involved. Jesus has healed on the Sabbath and he's manufactured ointment. Two of the many things that were prohibited on the Sabbath. So he's a Sabbath breaker but he's also a miracle worker – these two things can't go together. They say he can't be a good man because he's broken the Sabbath and somebody says well he can't be a bad man because a blind man can see. So they're stuck with their own contradictory logic. What a dilemma – so they ask the man himself and he says 'I think he's a man of God'. Well the Pharisees won't accept this so they respond with anger and insult. You were born in sin from top to toe and they throw him out. Notice how the man has lost all fear. His testimony sticks to facts and he stands by what Jesus has done for him.

As a result he's been thrown out of the synagogue, perhaps his parents will never speak to him again. Certainly the Pharisees never will. He's probably lost a whole lot of acquaintances but now Jesus finds him and he's concerned not with this man's physical sight but his spiritual health. Jesus asks him, do you believe in the Son of man to which the man replies I don't know him and Jesus says it's the person who's talking to you now. And the man believed and fell down and worshipped Jesus. The man had received physical health but was not whole until he had received salvation.

And if there's one more thing that's tragic than a person who can't see, it's a person who won't and who just closes their eyes to what Jesus is offering. The chapter closes with the same question as at the beginning. Who was guilty of this blindness said the disciples. Jesus said neither that man nor the parents. To the Pharisees Jesus said you are guilty for your blindness because it is you who closed your eyes to the truth. When Jesus came into the world a lot of people were better off – a

lame man could walk, a deaf man could hear, a blind man could see, a dead man could rise but there were many others who were worse off..

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