

## 26<sup>th</sup> March - Coronavirus - A Theological Reflection

Hi everyone,

"So Patrick, tell me", said my father, looking at me intently from his armchair. "Did God cause the tsunami - yes or no?"

It was 2004, shortly after the Boxing Day Tsunami had killed over 200,000 people in fourteen countries. I was on one of my visits to Moscow to see Dad and, at some point in a conversation about world events, things took a theological turn. My father, once a committed Christian but now a settled agnostic, was well versed in the teachings of the bible and loved to challenge my Christian viewpoint (though never aggressively it must be said). Hence his question.

I wanted my answer to be a good one so I paused before replying, rapidly surveying the various theological lines of thought open to me:

*Line one: God's Judgement* - his anger at a world turned away from him - so, yes this was caused by God. But then I knew my father's next question would be, 'But how is this a God of love? Why Asia, why now and why so indiscriminate?'

*Line two: The Powers of Evil* - their intention being to kill, hurt and destroy. So not God. But then I knew Dad would simply ask, 'Well if God is Almighty, then why doesn't he prevent this evil?'

*Line three: The Powers of Evil, but for God's Greater Purpose*. Again, not God, but allowed by him. But I knew what Dad's response would then be: 'Err, what greater purpose? And isn't the refusal to prevent an evil when it is within your power to do so tantamount to committing that evil yourself?'

*Line four: The Doctrine of the Fall*. Humankind's disobedience causing sin and breakdown in relation to God, each other and the planet. Hence our beautiful but broken world where nothing works quite as it should. But, again, I could foresee his response: 'That might make some sense when it comes to human conflict and the horrors of war, but not to the devastation caused by the movement of tectonic plates under the sea that are part of earth's design and were there long before humans ever walked the earth.'

*Line five:* Can't think of one. 'I'll get back to you on that one Dad', I replied eventually.

That was almost sixteen years ago and, as far as I recall (and please don't judge me), I never did get back to him. Why not? Simply because, when it comes to our belief in an all powerful and loving God in a world where there is suffering, we find ourselves confronted with a dilemma that has no easy answer. Theologians have a word for it. Theodicy. And it's what all of us engage in whenever we ask the question, 'Why me? Why has God allowed this to happen to me?'

So when it comes to the coronavirus, where do we believe God is in this? Did he cause the virus? Is it part of his will and part of his plan, or is it something he weeps over and

longs to see wiped from the earth? Or ... is it both? In a Church Times article two weeks ago, priest and medical doctor Alison Gray suggested that viruses are part of God's good creation. 'Bacteria and viruses are essential for life on earth ... they are important in controlling the bacteria population ... and are important in the cycles of death and decay .. a tiny percentage can cause human disease'. So, much like tectonic plates on the surface of the earth, we have the paradox of something that is both necessary (designed by God?) yet potentially dangerous to humankind.

This isn't just about coronavirus, of course. Throughout history plagues have caused the death of millions. It's just that now, in the West, we have been so well protected that this is hitting us, collectively, harder than we have ever been hit before. But be it corona, cancer or cholera, how do we accommodate the existence of sickness and disease within our understanding of faith and the teachings of scripture?

I'm going to be completely honest and say: I don't know. And I say that because that's the truth - I don't know. But there are things I believe and have found to hold true over the years, so I offer these to you now in the hope that they may be of help. So here goes:

1. *You can believe in a loving and all powerful God in a world where there is suffering.* No, it doesn't make complete sense. Yes, it is a mystery, but so many spiritual truths derive their power from paradox. Despite my questioning and wrestling I really do believe that God is both good and almighty.

2. *People who are suffering don't need a theological explanation as to why they are going through what they are going through.* They just don't. When someone is in pain, or a family is grieving, they just want to be loved. They want a quiet presence. They want you to cry with them and be with them in the not knowing. Although we don't look to blame God, neither do we need to defend him. It's okay not to have all the answers. For an appropriate pastoral response to Covid 19, take a look at this brief, but helpful link sent by the Baptist Union. <http://www.faithspace.org.uk/virus.php>

3. *Be open to and grateful for the good that can come from suffering.* Not always (there is, after all, a degree of suffering from which we can see no good thing emerge), but sometimes - often in fact. Often, through suffering, walls come down, impossible situations change, lives are transformed, relationships are healed, new vocations are found, inspiration leads to new discoveries, and people turn to God. Already in these days of lockdown, despite the fear and the reality of people dying, many good things are becoming apparent both for the church and for the world. We can celebrate this.

4. *Understand that, as believers, we are not exempt.* Whilst I don't think it is wrong to pray for safety and protection, we must recognise that in every epidemic and tragedy those with faith in Christ have been exposed to suffering and death as much as those without faith. The story of the the man who built his house on the rock and the other on the sand bears this out; both were hit by the storm. But it also makes the point that one was safe (in the spiritual sense) because of the faith foundation of his life. I attach here an excellent letter written to church leaders from Mike Hill of the Global Leadership Network. I particularly like his reference to the behaviour of Christians in Rome in the 3rd century. Take a look here. [Letter from Mike Hill.pdf](#)

5. *Know that God himself, through Christ, chose to suffer.* This, for me, is the biggest one - that the creator of the universe should choose to live our life and die our death and make himself known to us so that in and through every experience we know he understands - and that in his moment of greatest weakness was the revelation of the fullness of his glory - that he calls us to suffer too and through our suffering he is with us and willing us to become more like him. This, for me, is the one that means I can continue to carry the tension and live with the not knowing.

6. *It's all in the Bible - read the book of Job.* The best exploration of theodicy and the dilemma of suffering is found in the book of Job, right there in the middle of our bibles. Like point 5, this, too, has been something that has helped me carry the tensions. That Job can rail at God, accuse him of all sorts of injustice and questionable behaviour, and yet in the end to be found to have spoken truth is the biggest relief. A decade ago, as part of my theological studies, I wrote an essay on Job. Just giving it a quick re-read I think it speaks to our current situation, so I attach it here. [Theological themes in Job.pdf](#)

My father is 97 now (he was 81 back in 2004) and what with his blindness and frailty conversation is more limited. But were I to be with him now (sadly, my intended trip to Russia this spring can't now happen) and he were to ask me about God and the coronavirus, this is what I might have replied. I don't know if he would have been satisfied, but I hope it would have at least made some sense, just as I hope it makes some sense to you.

Every blessing,

*Patrick*