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ST. JOHN'S
IN THE VILLAGE

**God and the
Problem of Evil
& Suffering**

This tract was written by the Rev'd Lloyd Prator, Rector of St. John's Church in the Village. It is printed by St. John's. All rights reserved.

God and the Problem of Evil & Suffering

Thousands of pages have been written on this subject. Probably the most frequently asked question about religion is whether or not it is possible to reconcile a God of power and love with the existence of evil. Let's take a moment to understand what lies behind this difficult and challenging question.

There are two kinds of evil. Volitional evil and natural evil. Natural evil consists of events like hurricanes, epidemics, plagues and other examples of occasions when it appears that nature has gone seriously wrong. Volitional evil is the result of human choices; examples of that kind of evil might include a president who lies to his people, or a dictator who kills 14 million of his own people, or a terrorist who bombs a building filled with the innocent, or, at a less cosmic level, a personal decision to cheat on one's income taxes or steal from one's employer.

In fact, in order to have a consistent and somewhat predictable world, and in order for human beings to be genuinely free, it is necessary that we tolerate both kinds of evil. It is essential that both kinds of evil be possible in order for human freedom to have any meaning and for the natural world to be orderly and useful to us.

If God were to step in and set aside every hurricane and every virus which plagues us, pretty soon, the natural world would lose its predictability and we human beings would be unable to rely upon an orderly nature. If you stop to think about it, the same gravity that pulls a fully loaded airplane down from the sky, killing three hundred people, is the same law of gravity that enables us to drive ambulances along roadways to bring people to medical care. Natural evil, then, is a result of a consistent created order.

What about our choosing to do evil to our brothers and sisters? In order for human choices to have any meaning, we have to be able to choose bad things. My decision to love you, for example, is utterly without any significance unless I also have the ability to hate you. A part of what makes your love delightful to me is that you chose to care for me in that way, that your choice was a result of several moral options. Thus freedom is an essential precondition for loving another person. One must be free to act immorally in order that a moral act may have any power or authority.

Such freedom is also the way in which we participate in God. The images we have of God, as the creator, the one whose spirit brooded over the chaos at creation, the images of wind and fire, the image of the potter at his wheel who can remake a clay vessel at will – all of these images are primarily images of freedom. Thus, freedom is an essential characteristic of God's nature. God exercises absolute freedom; perhaps God is the only one who does. Our limited freedom is one of the ways in which we participate in God. It is one of the ways in which we are in the image or likeness of God. We are like God because we have the largest arena of freedom within the created order.

But freedom has its downside, too. The price of having a Mother Teresa who witnesses with such power to the love of God is that we also must have a Josef Stalin who witnesses to the power of murderous hatred.

The issue is freedom. The natural order is free according to its nature, and humans, too, are free. We call human freedom free will. God seems, on balance, to place a high value upon freedom.

Having a world where we are free to choose evil or good means that this life will always be, at best, a morally ambiguous enterprise. Christianity teaches that it is our vocation to create situations where more and more people make better and better

uses of their freedom. If you believe in a civilized world which is becoming better, then you can see ways in which more people are making better choices. Perhaps you are right. If you are, then part of the answer to the problem of evil is that God and humanity are working together to defeat the forces of evil and to bring about a world which draws nearer and nearer to perfection.

I believe, on the other hand, that Christianity offers only limited hope for genuine glory in this life. The Christian faith is a faith in the life of the world to come, and when we speak of that hope in the Nicene Creed, we are putting our faith not in this world, but in the world which waits for us beyond this life. That world is the world of resurrection life. The Christian vocation is to make this life as much like the risen life as we can – that is why we promise, in our baptism, to renounce the evil powers of this world, and to persevere in resisting evil in all its forms. But it is, I think, the unambiguous teaching of the church that the fullness of God's purposes do not come about until we die and are completed and perfected by God in the resurrection life.

Which is a little like saying that we can – and should – strive all we can, but in the end, the whole matter is resolved on the other side of the grave. As is so often the case, the answer lies in the kingdom of God, or perhaps more accurately, the answer lies in God. The answer lies in our destiny, which is to be in God.

Having said all of this about volitional evil and natural evil and the problem of human suffering, one thing remains. And perhaps it is the most important thing of all. The question remains of how we cope with the suffering which comes our way and how we make sense of it, particularly when we speak to others who may turn to us as resources for what the Church and the faith teach about evil and suffering. Here we come, inevitably, to a theological idea called redemption.

Redemption means the way in which God brings something good out of something bad. In fact, the community which God gathers is itself a way in which God brings something good out of that which is evil. Even though we are not Jews, we trace our ancestry back to Abraham and the creation of the community of faith called Israel. Jesus, following the same dynamic of community development, left behind a Church to be his community. That community is so closely bound up with him that sometimes we refer to it as his body.

The Church has had a checkered history, as have all human institutions. But remember its foundation. The Church was founded at Pentecost, scholars suggest, at the moment when the spirit was poured out upon the early disciples after the resurrection. In that moment, they felt within themselves the same power which has raised Jesus to new life. That moment was so powerful that it seemed like fire – flames which rested upon each one's head. This power bound the community together and gave them the task to share that power with others in time of need. When the church is aware that it has that power and that mission, it is behaving at its very best. When we lose those we love, when we receive the notice of the terminal illness, when we are rejected by the world, we bring those concerns and those pains to the community. Being sustained by those who love us, being nurtured at the altar, hearing the word of God preached in a way that touches our pain, these are some of the things that the community does. And when it does them, it redeems the suffering we endure, it brings some good out of evil.

If you are searching for ways to speak sensitively and usefully to someone in pain, it may be well to have some of these ideas I have shared with you firmly tucked in your brain. But it is probably not best to share them. Just at the moment that someone receives the news of terminal cancer diagnosis is not the moment to begin speaking about God's way of giving even microbes, viruses and diseases the freedom of the natural order. Just at the moment that a

man learns that his police officer wife has been killed by a drunken criminal is not the moment to speak about the importance of human freedom as a part of our identity in the image of God. Later, much later, the Church, through its teaching function, can help these persons support their lives with good theology. But at the moment of human crisis, it is the power of the cross that sustains those who endure evil. The cross tells us that God himself feels our suffering and endures the evil which we must endure. Each of us baptized in Christ can become bearers of that cross. We bear that cross when we care for, love, and support those who suffer.

God has created a redeeming community and we are part of that community. We may wonder why God has created a world in which things go so awfully wrong. But we cannot argue that God, in the crucified Jesus, has abandoned us to the perils of evil and sin. On the contrary, the cross is the sign that God is right here in the midst of it with us. And we are meant to be that way with each other.

Church Entrance
218 West Eleventh St.
NYC 10014

Parish Office/Mailing Address:
224 Waverly Place
NYC 10014

The Reverend Lloyd Prator, Rector

Telephone: (212) 243-6192
Fax: (212)604-0688

Church Website:
www.stjvny.org

Sunday: Eucharist at 8:00 am
Solemn Eucharist at 11:00 am

Monday, Wednesday, Friday: Eucharist at 6:15 pm
Holy Days at 6:30 pm

Monday - Friday: Morning Prayer at 8:00 am