

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

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“The Mystery of Suffering in Eastern Orthodoxy: The practice of the Presence of God in the Jesus Prayer”

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I

Bishop James Wingle has rightly observed that our largely secular society and culture are deeply marked by hedonism or the pursuit of pleasure, and are tainted by the culture of death (*Pastoral Care: The Rejection of Suffering and the Search for Personal Wellbeing*, p 3). Suffering for the culture is therefore something to flee from, something to escape from, something to evade.

I want to point out to secular hedonists that pain and suffering have very positive aspects. Pain is the gift nobody wants. This is the title of one of the most interesting books I have read in many years. It's by a world-renowned missionary surgeon specializing in treatment of leprosy. His name is Dr Paul Brand. Dr Brand tells the story of Tanya, whom he met in his clinic in the United States when she was four years old. Her parents were beside themselves because Tanya kept injuring herself. Dr Brand started removing the bandages around Tanya's ankle. He could tell her ankle was fully dislocated, but she did not flinch. He looked at the soles of her feet and saw grossly infected ulcers on both feet. He probed the wounds even to the bone and Tanya did not flinch.

You see, Tanya had a rare congenital condition in which she could feel no pain. She had no instinct for self-preservation. When she burned her fingers on a stove, she felt a tingling sensation which she enjoyed, especially when what she did provoked a reaction in anyone nearby. Dr Brand told Tanya's parents that she had no built-in warning system to defend herself from further injury, and that nothing would improve until Tanya understood her problem and consciously began to protect herself.

Seven years later, when Tanya was eleven, her mother called Dr Brand. Tanya was now living in an institution. She had lost both legs to amputation. She had lost most of her fingers. Her elbows were constantly dislocated. The ulcers on her hands and amputation stumps had chronic sepsis. Her tongue was lacerated and badly scarred from her nervous habit of chewing it. Her father, who had deserted when she was five, had called her a monster. But Tanya was no monster, only an extreme example of life without pain. Why?

Because pain is an early-warning system. Pain may very well be the gift of God that nobody wants, but without this gift, we would soon be as badly injured, sick and pathetic as Tanya was. Life without pain can really hurt you.

II

Suffering is like physical pain in that we don't want it. Suffering comes in many shapes and sizes, pain being one of them. But there is also emotional suffering, spiritual suffering, the suffering that we call depression, and so on. That there should be suffering at all is a question that occurs to many people, and some people stop believing in God when they see the suffering caused by murder, war or natural disasters like cancer, earthquakes and tidal waves. The short answer why there is suffering is that it is a consequence of the fall from grace and obedience on the part of angels and of mankind. But the fall is itself a mystery. Evil is a mystery (cf 2 Thess. 2:7), especially when we realize that evil is a negation and exists only in a parasitic way.

Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, author of *The Orthodox Church*, and an Oxford professor, says this to help us. He says, "At once it must be admitted that no easy answer...is possible. Pain and evil confront us as a surd. Suffering, our own and that of others, is an experience through which we have to live, not a theoretical problem that we can explain away. If there is an explanation, it is on a level deeper than words. Suffering cannot be 'justified'; but it can be used, accepted—and, through this acceptance, transfigured. 'The paradox of suffering and evil,' says Nicholas Berdyaev, 'is resolved in the experience of compassion and love.' (*The Orthodox Way*, 1979 ed., p 75; 1995 rev. ed., p57).

Even so we don't like suffering, and we find St Paul incomprehensible when he writes about the joy of suffering. In Colossians 1 he says, "I now

rejoice in my sufferings for you” (Col. 1:24). The reason that St Paul finds any joy in suffering is that the greatest mystery of all time has now been revealed to us, because God has willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery..., “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Christ and the hope of glory make suffering an occasion for joy. Jesus Christ is the original transformer of lemons into lemonade. He raised Lazarus from the dead after Lazarus had been dead for four days and was beginning to stink. He himself rose from the dead on the third day, so that his tomb was empty and his corpse was transformed into a spiritual body that could pass through doors and yet eat honey and fish and prepare a barbeque breakfast of fish for his disciples on the west bank of Lake Galilee.

III

So Christ Jesus brings meaning to life as well as salvation from sin and death. Without Christ the Lamb of God, without Christ the victorious resurrection and the life, we can quickly conclude that life is meaningless, that the only meaning we can create is the pleasure of eating and drinking and being merry before we die. Or we conclude that life is about power, about dominating others, even if our dominance be for their own good. But all this is essentially vanity and delusion. Living in the land of the lotus-eaters is no life at all, as Odysseus found. Gaining the whole world and losing your own soul is the ultimate folly. We need to start knowing ourselves. And we need to start knowing the new Adam, Jesus Christ. We come to know Christ in a way through the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and through the preaching of his Church. But such knowledge is merely head-knowledge, unless we come to know him through the Holy Spirit and prayer. We need to talk to Christ. We need to love him.

The first prayer we need to know is the Lord’s Prayer, and this prayer is addressed to God the Father. It is a good Jewish prayer, as the former mayor of Toronto, Nathan Phillips once said. But as a gift of Jesus to us, it is more than a good Jewish prayer, for we cannot call God Father rightly until we have been reconciled to God by God’s Son, Jesus Christ. We need to be in Christ to call God our Father. We need to believe in Christ, obey him, be baptized into him by water and the Spirit. But I must go on to the second and third prayers that we need to know.

The second prayer that we need to know is the Hail Mary. We Orthodox begin, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you, O Virgin *Theotokos*.”

Theotokos means Mother of God. This is also affirmed in the Catholic version, when you say, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” The reason that this prayer to Mary, a creature and fellow human being, is important is that it underlines that Jesus is God and that we need the prayer support of the Saints and the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Gospel of reconciliation with God makes no sense unless Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Because Jesus is fully God, we must call Mary the Mother of God, as Karl Barth stated in his Church Dogmatics. But we know that Mary is not mother of God the Father, simply (!) the mother of Jesus, who is God’s only Son. Mary is also our mother.

The third prayer that we need to know is the Jesus Prayer. Originally the Jesus Prayer was simply repetition of his name: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and so on. But not just repetition, also remembering who he is and what he has done and that he is coming again. His name is part and parcel of his being, and to repeat it with faith, hope and love is to connect with the One who is the Bread of life; who is the way, the truth and the life; and who is the resurrection and the life.

For perhaps the last thousand years, the Jesus Prayer has these words: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” We say Lord because the first Christian Creed was “Jesus is Lord,” a creed inspired by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3); a creed hated by the self-styled divine Roman Emperors, who called themselves Lord; a creed that appalled the Jewish leadership, who could call only God as Lord.

The name Jesus means Saviour or God saves. In Hebrew it would be Yeshua or Joshua. Christ means the Anointed King of Israel, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Son of God means equality with God the Father. Have mercy on me means not only forgive me but also heal me, help me, bless me, give me the Holy Spirit. Me a sinner means me who have not reached the mark of Christ’s perfect maturity and humanity; me who have hurt others; me who have hurt myself in many ways, even as Tanya did; me who have turned away from God.

We say this prayer at any time, say, during a red traffic light, or waiting at a check-out counter, and when we wake up or go to bed. We also say the Jesus Prayer on a prayer rope. My prayer rope has a cross, four beads and a hundred knots. I pray the Jesus prayer at each bead and each knot. Because I am very far from the perfection of holy love, I pray the Jesus Prayer only 50 times at any one time, usually during my evening prayers.

The point is not how many times you pray, though praying many times helps to get the prayer from your head into your heart, where with God's help you can pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). The point is to spend time with Jesus, to focus on Jesus, to open yourself to God the Holy Spirit, who himself helps us in our weakness and who makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26). Our mission is the same as that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to be a blessing for all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3c). We can become this only by being in Christ and by being temples of his Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6).