

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 7 March 2010, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

3rd Sunday of Lent

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'In the name of Christ we gather' (CH 677)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'I danced in the morning' (CH 404)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

We thank you, O God,
for sun and rain, for moon and stars.
Life is getting easier
every day the sun shines a bit longer.
Nights are more beautiful with silver light.
We thank you, O God,
that you give us the feeling of new life
every year again.

And we pray, O God,
for places and people where it does not work.
Places with very little hope or light in life:
the slums and urban priority areas,
where people live in primitive huts
or run-down highrise flats.
People with little hope for life:
because violence devastated them,
because they struggle to get out of poverty,
because they feel it never stops.
We pray for places and people,
and we ask you to help us to help where we can.

Lord, teach us to pray:
Our Father,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
The daily bread we need
give it to us each day.
Release us from our wrongdoing,

as we also release those who wrong us.
And do not bring us into a trial.
Amen.

Readings : Exodus 3:1-11 & Luke 13:1-9 (*Good News Bible*)

Hymn : 'O God, you are my God alone' (CH 43)

Sermon

In 1998 five young men from Iona returned from an evening out on Mull. As they had done many times before they set off in their small boat. What exactly happened, we do not know, but the boat capsized. It was around midnight, and weather conditions were freezing. One boy could not swim and held on to the boat's hull. Since they were not far off the others tried to swim to the shore. They all drowned. People said the boy who survived by clinging on to the boat, suffered much. Why did he survive while the others drowned? Eventually he left the island.

On more than one occasion people told me their stories about losing loved ones. Most of the times the story ended with one big 'Why?' To be honest, I do not dare to answer the question. What exactly do we know? Religious 'solutions' mostly fail to present true answers.

People are very different. Some get depressed from this torturous 'Why?' question. Others take a more pragmatic view and go on with their lives.

(By the way, do you know the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? An optimist thinks this world is the best possible of all worlds. A pessimist is afraid this is true...)

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The question why people suffer is as old as humanity. In Buddhism it was the question that started off the Buddha's initial quest. We can find it throughout the Bible. However, the Bible does not give an answer. It does come up with a couple of options, but some are contradictory and none is final.¹

However, the question can really threaten us. If there is a God Almighty, then why are young people killed in our streets, why do people die from hunger, why do earthquakes and tsunamis happen, why do wars go on for ever, why were Kurds, Jews, gypsies, Hutus, Tutsis, Cambodians and so many more subject to genocide? If there is a God Almighty, something should be done about it, isn't it?

Part of the answer is, that the word 'Almighty' is something the Bible translations have burdened us with. Reading the stories we think we have to accept that God is literally

¹ A challenging, but very honest book about this is: Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem* (New York [etc.]: HarperCollins, 2008). I do not fully agree with his conclusion, but he makes a very clear point.

behind everything that happens. But 'almighty' is certainly not the correct translation of the Hebrew word. And in the New Testament the word 'Almighty' is quite rare and almost exclusively confined to the book of Revelation, in a very specific context.² To the writers of the Bible it was not so clear at all that God would literally be pulling all strings in creation and therefore being the literal cause of everything that happens to us. I lost my faith in such a God very quickly when I became a nurse, because I refuse to believe that God allows, or even wants, all this suffering and dying.

But as I said, the Bible does not really answer that terrible 'Why?' question. Jesus does not when they ask him why these people were murdered by Pilate's soldiers, while they were only bringing sacrifices. Or why did those people die when the Siloam tower collapsed? Jesus does not answer the question, he bounces it. 'If you think suffering is a punishment for sin, then be aware of how much suffering you deserve yourself, since you are just as much a sinner.' Jesus does not say why people have to suffer, but he does not put the blame on God either. All he does in this story, is to hold a mirror and make people think about the things they do which might make others suffer.

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A common explanation for human suffering is, that we have a free will.³ We make our own choices and too often we choose poorly. That is how we make others and ourselves suffer.

There is some reason in this, especially if you think of the violence at home, in city streets or on battlefields, we continue to produce. But how much free choice had those of us who were sent to fight a war? Domestic violence can never be accepted, but if violence was the only thing you received in your own life, how difficult is it to learn to do better?

Apart from this, the fact that human beings can make their own choices does not make any difference for earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods or tsunamis. They just happen and there is extremely little we can do about it.

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So the answer is: there is no answer. We simply cannot fully understand why there is suffering. It just is, and in one way or another we will have to cope with it. Miracles absolutely do happen, but certainly not to all of us and never at our request. I can remember someone who was distinctly unreligious, but said it was a miracle that he recovered from his illness. He really did not think any divine being had interfered, but he simply did not know a better word.

² In Revelation the context is apocalyptic, but we know that the early church's expectation of Jesus returning very soon, has not come true. I have written an article about the translation and interpretation of the Hebrew and Greek words, which can be downloaded from my website: <http://www.marnel.org.uk/meWork.html#Almighty>. Not for the faint-hearted, I'm afraid.

³ Which can be blamed on the German Enlightenment philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716).

Moses basically walked away from his people's suffering. Literally. He fled to Midian and found a safe life as a shepherd. Today we heard how he led his sheep as far into the desert as he could. But right there, in the middle of nowhere, God meets him. God just pins him down. Literally. And God sends him – to save his people and to lead them out of Egypt, the land of death and slavery. There is no explanation for Israel's suffering, no word about God's possible role in it. There is only this word: 'Moses, go!'

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We would really like to know why people suffer. Why we suffer ourselves. And we want to know who we can hold accountable. But the answer is, that there is no answer.

We have projected our own human, childish fantasies of superpower on God. We can think, silently for ourselves, or a bit louder if we are standing in a pub, 'If we were in charge, well, we would...' That is childish, because we should know that those in real power are just as much juggled around between other powerful people and forces from outside. The Chilcot inquiry is investigating how things really went on regarding Iraq. It seems to me that none of those who were in power could really manage the process that was going on. People are always limited in power, regardless their position. And we are not any better.

We should stop projecting our human will for power on God by calling him almighty in the sense of being in absolute power over anything happening. God's might and glory are of a different kind. The kind that turns our hierarchies and powerplays upside down, basically by just neglecting them. In God's might the poor, who will still be poor, come first. And God's glory comes with children.

Perhaps we should try to understand how God is all close, rather than almighty.⁴ Because if God is really close to us, we can face life, and even suffering. I believe that is how Jesus walked his way to the cross. Jesus did not expect any supernatural intervention. He did not want to be made king in a literal sense. He just went. As Moses just went when God sent him. They relied on God to be close, to walk with them. And that was good enough.

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These four boys who drowned in the Sound of Iona left deep scars behind among their families and the island community. An accident, with nobody to blame. You could not even call it 'an act of God'. It was hard to find a reason, it is impossible to answer the 'Why?' question. Still, life did go on. Sadder and wiser, and never again as it was before, but still.

If we in our own lives have to suffer – as it is part of life – may we find the grace to go

⁴ Klaus Koch, commenting on the book of Job: '...nicht der Allmächtige, sondern der Allernächste...' ('not the Almighty, but the one most near'). Quoted in: Claus Westermann, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament*, I/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) p311.

on, like Moses, like Jesus. May we find the courage not to play the blame game, and not to look for revenge. May we instead find that God walks close to us, stumbling when we do, sometimes gently helping us to laugh at ourselves, and sending people to support us. May we find this grace whenever we suffer. Because in these graceful moments when God comes close, we will experience the most mighty presence we could ever think of.

Amen.

Hymn : 'I, the Lord of sea and sky' (CH 251)

Offering and Dedication

Prayer of Intercession

In prayer we remember,
among ourselves and before God,
the week behind us and the week to come.
We remember our politicians,
whenever they tried to be honest
and whenever they walked away from truth;
we remember those who build bridges
to bring people together
who come from very different backgrounds,
and we remember those who only feed hatred
using the same old racist and fascist language;
we remember those who were healthy and strong,
and those who needed a lot of care.

We remember the week to come,
all the things we need to do,
things we dread or fear,
things that give us joy,
things that just need to be done;
we remember the boring and exciting things,
the common tasks and new adventures,
your wonderful creation and the mess we make.

And we pray, O God,
that you will see all tears,
hear all cries
and have mercy.
Strengthen the meek, the poor, the peacemakers,
and confront the powerful, the arrogant, the selfish.
May your kingdom come,
right among us,
and may we live to see it coming.
Lead us in the week to come,

give us the courage to do whatever we can do,
give us the humility to accept what we cannot do,
and give us the wisdom to see the difference.

In silence we remember those
we know need us
to remember them.
(silence)

So we pray to God,
who suffered as Christ suffered,
and who will bear our suffering with us.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'Be still' (CH 189)

Blessing