

## **Why bad things happen to good people**

A sermon by Rev John Castle, given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup>  
September 2021

Readings: Job 19; Luke 13:1-5

### **Difficult questions**

I wonder what is the most difficult question you have ever been asked about the Christian faith? And what is the most difficult question you yourself have ever asked?

In June and July many of you filled in a survey in connection with our project to become a more Intergenerational Church, and the survey invited suggestions for topics for sermons. Today is the second in our series of 5 Tough Questions for Today's Church: *Why do bad things happen to good people?* We all know that there is a lot of suffering in the world – for example, people suffering from the recent earthquake in Haiti, or people who've had to flee their homes to escape war, violence or persecution. But people often ask this question when the suffering is closer to home, such as when someone they know dies from an incurable disease, or is killed in an accident that was someone else's fault. Perhaps we wouldn't have too much of a problem with someone getting drunk, recklessly driving a car and killing themselves in a car crash. But when that crash also kills a mother of young children walking innocently along the pavement, it seems so unfair.

So how can we make sense of a world where these things happen?

## **A scientific perspective**

Now there are several different ways of addressing this issue. Let's take, for instance, cancer. Why do people get cancer? Well, scientists have been working on this for many years, and there are a number of reasons why a particular person gets cancer. It could be to do with their environment, for example Roy Castle the TV entertainer attributed his lung cancer to years of playing the trumpet in smoky clubs, even though he didn't smoke himself.

It could be due to poor diet or lack of exercise, or drinking too much alcohol. It could also be due to genetic factors outside your control – think of Angelina Jolie who had a double mastectomy because she knew she was carrying a gene that would likely lead to breast cancer. It could be a combination of environment, behaviour and genetics.

From a scientific point of view, there is no reason why a “good” person would be any less likely to get cancer than a “bad” person, unless it is the person's good or bad behaviour or lifestyle that contributes to their misfortune. Lightning does not discriminate between “good” and “bad” people when it strikes.

## **Bringing God into it**

So why do people ask why bad things happen to good people? It seems to me that the only reason you would ask this is if you believe in some kind of divine power behind the universe, whose job it is to make sure that there is justice in the world. If there is a God who is all-powerful, loving and just, then surely it's his job to make the world a fairer place,

and make sure that bad things don't happen to people who don't deserve them.

I'd like you to imagine that God goes on holiday for a week, and gives you the job of running the universe while he's away. God gives you his powers and says you can use them however you see fit. What would you do differently during that week when you are running the universe?

In the 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*, Bruce Nolan, played by Jim Carrey, is a television reporter, living with his girlfriend Grace (played by Jennifer Aniston). After getting beaten up in the street, and losing his job, he complains to God that God is not doing his job properly. And he finds himself meeting God, played by Morgan Freeman, who gives him the chance to see if he can do a better job himself. Bruce starts off using his new powers for his own advantage, but then God tells him that he needs to attend to all the prayers that are coming in.

To cut a long story short, Bruce makes quite a mess of things, not realising that intervening in the natural course of the world through miracles can have unintended consequences. Doing God's job better than God does is not as straightforward as it might appear.

## **Bad news**

So let's get back to our theme: why bad things happen to good people. 43 years ago a policeman rang at my parent's door. My father opened, and the conversation went something like this.

*Policeman:* I'm sorry to trouble you, sir, but are you the parent of John Castle?

*Father:* Yes.

*Policeman:* Well, I'm very sorry to tell you, but your son has been involved in a road traffic accident and has been taken to Orpington Hospital.

I had been cycling to a youth bible study meeting, and was riding along a main road with a 50 mph limit when I was hit from behind by a speeding car. The driver didn't stop, but fortunately the 2 cars following were driven by a doctor and a nurse. The bike was a write-off, and I could well have been too - I had three broken ribs, a punctured lung and a broken leg, as well as cuts to my head. This experience taught me to value the gift of each day, and not to take life for granted.

I was fortunate, as were my parents, and am still here to tell the tale. Many other parents aren't so lucky.

Today's OT reading comes from the book of Job. In chapter 1 a messenger comes to Job to tell him that his 10 adult children have been killed by a freak whirlwind that destroyed the house where they were having a party. This comes on top of reports that Job's wealth, consisting in his large herds of oxen, donkeys and camels, has been stolen by raiding tribesmen. And to cap it all, he is struck down by an incurable skin disease.

The story is a parable of unfair suffering. Job is a righteous and godly man, so much so that in two scenes in heaven we see God boasting about him to Satan. In the following chapters Job complains to God, a bit like Bruce in the film,

and Job's friends try to defend God by arguing that God is not unjust, so it must be that Job has sinned and that is why all these misfortunes have befallen him.

### **It's not fair**

There are many people today who struggle as much as Job does to understand why bad things happen to good people. To find that you or someone you love has incurable cancer, or suffers an accident that was not their fault, can be a terrible shock, one that you are completely unprepared for. And, like Job, some people seem to have to cope with multiple misfortunes all together, or in quick succession. If there is a God who is in charge of the universe, he ought to be protecting good people from misfortune. If there's a quota of cancers, or accidents, that has to be met, then surely God ought to direct those at the "bad" people on the earth – it would serve them right for their selfish behaviour.

But let's just think this through. If we're to make the world totally fair, with misfortunes being dished out according to how good or bad people are, we'd need something like a massive computer, loaded up with very sophisticated algorithms, to ensure that every action, word or thought is given a moral score, and each of us gets precisely the correct amount of good fortune or misfortune that we deserve. We can't have God making arbitrary decisions to bless one person or curse another. And how would this be assessed – on a weekly, daily or hourly basis? Assuming that the population of the planet and the total number of misfortunes remains the same, do you think you would come off better or worse? And I don't know about you, but I think there are already quite enough algorithms controlling

what we see or read on the internet, without God resorting to such a system for running the universe.

## **What did Jesus say?**

In any case, the teaching of Jesus tells us that this is not how God works. Jesus taught that God makes his sun shine on the righteous and the unrighteous<sup>1</sup> – he does not deal with us as our sins deserve, but in his grace he blesses those who are undeserving and even ungrateful<sup>2</sup>. In today’s gospel reading from Luke, people tell Jesus about two recent catastrophes that had happened –18 people had been killed in an accident, when a tower had fallen down, and a group of Galileans had been massacred by Pilate’s soldiers. In both cases, Jesus said, the deaths weren’t a punishment from God for the victim’s sins. Stuff happens. People suffer. It’s part of the complexity of how the world works, which includes the fact that people have free will which can be used for good or bad purposes. The Galileans were the victims of violence and oppression by the Roman occupation. Perhaps the tower fell because of poor workmanship, or maybe the accident was nobody’s fault.

## **A complex problem**

Today, scientific knowledge helps us to understand how the world works. The beauty of mountain ranges are the result of the same seismic forces that cause earthquakes that kill people. Changing weather patterns are not an “act of God”, but are caused by global warming which is at least partly the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:45

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:34

result of human industrial activity. The good and bad things that happen are due to a complex pattern of cause and effect between natural forces and human decisions. Yes, God does care about his creation, and particularly about human beings. He is both all-powerful and all-wise. He is certainly capable of intervening in the workings of his own creation, but in doing so he is working with a seemingly infinite range of possible outcomes, and underneath it all he has his own purposes for the world and for us humans which are beyond the ability of our finite minds to comprehend.

### **Is God accountable?**

In the book of Job, Job wants to meet God face to face and get an explanation. He believes that it is God who has brought all his misfortunes upon him, and sees God as his enemy. So how does it all turn out in the end? Job does get an answer from God in chapters 38 to 41. But God's answer does not include an explanation of Job's suffering. God does not see the need to justify himself to Job:

‘Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?’  
(40:1, NIV)

God's answer to Job is to ask him where Job was when God was designing the universe, when he set the earth on its foundations, determined the limits of the seas, set the stars on their courses, created the variety of wild animals on the earth, or tamed the monsters of the primordial chaos? God's wisdom is beyond our understanding. He is not accountable to us for how he allows good and bad things to happen. As an old hymn puts it:

“God moves in a mysterious way/ his wonders to perform”<sup>3</sup>.

God’s speech in the concluding chapters of the book, and the words of Jesus, show that the simplistic idea that good things should only happen to good people and bad things to bad people is naïve and completely irrelevant. The universe as God has designed it just simply doesn’t work like that. As it says in the hymn I just quoted:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
but trust him for his grace;  
behind a frowning providence  
he hides a smiling face.

At least Job does get personal attention from the Almighty. And in the last chapter, God restores the fortunes of Job, making him twice as wealthy as at the beginning and blessing him with another 7 sons and 3 daughters. As Christians, we have the promise of eternal life with God in heaven, where there will be no more death, crying or pain<sup>4</sup>.

### **The suffering God**

Is that all we can say about the meaning of suffering? As Christians we do not have any better *explanation* than the book of Job. But there *is* another angle on the problem of suffering. The central Christian story is that the Son of God became a human being in the person of Jesus, and experienced both the joys and the sorrows of our lives. He brought healing and hope into people’s lives, but himself paid the ultimate price, going to the Cross to save the world.

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<sup>3</sup> *God moves in a mysterious way* by William Cowper (1731-1800)

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 21:3-5

There Jesus cried out like Job “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As Isaiah prophesied centuries before:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5 NIV)

Jesus experienced the depths of abandonment and the extremities of pain, but rose victorious over sin and death and opened the gate of heaven to mortals. One day we shall see God face to face<sup>5</sup>, and we shall then know whatever we need to know. And even more wonderfully, we shall know that we are, and always have been, deeply loved by our Creator and our Father, and by Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend.

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<sup>5</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:12