

7. If God is so wonderful why does life hurt so much?

When gunmen enter a school - whether it's the Infant School at Dunblane in Scotland or Columbine high school in Denver, USA - and shoot at children and leave behind them a scene that eyewitnesses have compared to some medieval depiction of hell, then it can understandably seem to many people that God has gone 'AWOL' and some naked evil has taken over the reins of the universe.

The photographic image of the tiny corpse of one year old Baylee Almon cradled in the arms of fire-fighter Chris Fields as he carried her away from the Oklahoma bombing still chokes me. My son, Michael, was about the same age when the attack took place on that US government building. It's not difficult to understand why, to many people, there's apparently plenty of evidence for the absence of a loving God. And we haven't yet mentioned genocide in Rwanda, so-called ethnic-cleansing in the Balkans, hurricanes in Central America, life-destroying drought in the Sudan and floods in Bangladesh. We live with the media images of the victims, and we can't solve it just by flicking to another channel. For as you scan your own address list of friends and relatives you're sure to be reminded of pain closer to home in the shape of illness, accidents, family break-ups... Pain unites them all, making the question seem reasonable: 'If God is so wonderful, why does life hurt so much?'

When my daughter was three years old sometimes she'd present me with a colouring she'd done from a colouring book. The colours went all over the lines and usually the only way to make any sense of what it was, was to start by looking for any part of the original printed outlines that were still visible. In the same way any investigation of the unknown needs to begin by starting with what's known. What conclusions have we come to in this series as we've faced up to life's big issues? Is God really someone who enjoys inflicting pain on those who can't fight back? Or is this world, as Van Gogh put it, 'one of his sketches that turned out badly'? That wouldn't fit with what we've already seen in Jesus, would it? So let's assume as our starting point that God does care very much - even if you don't feel it just now - and see where it leads us.

After all, a lot of the suffering we see around us is down to ourselves. Someone must have left the doors open on the car deck of the Herald of Free Enterprise, someone's responsible for planting the vicious landmines that are blowing children's legs off in various parts of the world right now, someone bungled to bring about the world's worst nuclear disaster so far at Chernobyl.

But sure, God could stop all this foolishness, just like a mother might snatch away scissors from the hands of a toddler before he hurts himself. God could deny us human choice, but who would want to be robbed of that basic dignity of humanness? We can't have it both ways. God could catch the bullet from the gunman's weapon, could take out all murderers, remove from society all rapists, all child abusers, all who have ever lost their temper, who've ever told lies or cheated - ah, but that's the problem, where does the line get drawn, and more to the point: how can I escape?

The Titanic, before it collided with an iceberg and sank killing more than 1500 people, had received repeated radio warnings from another ship, but the we'll-do-it-our-way crew told the would-be helpers to 'shut up'. Disaster could've been avoided if only those instructions had been followed. That's been the way of the world. Suffering wasn't in the original script, we had a choice.

It's a popular misconception that there is no room for the existence of both suffering and God. But, as we've mentioned, that's to ignore the fact that God gave us freewill. As the LONDON TIMES leader column said the day after the Scottish infant school shooting: 'Christ was born among inno-

cent slaughter and died on the Cross to pay the cost of our terrible freedom - a freedom by which we can do the greatest good or the greatest evil'. Any illustration is imperfect, but we might be helped just a little to think of God as being no more responsible for suffering in this world than careful parents are responsible for the fall of their child to whom they have just given the present of a new bicycle.

There's even a sense in which pain is good. If you think for a moment of how your body feels, pain can signal to us that's something's wrong and it can be very helpful in the diagnosis. If you've ever had the experience of taking a hurt child into hospital, and had any part to play in physically restraining him while he's given an injection - an injection that's he's struggling against because he's frightened and he knows it'll hurt even more - then you'll have felt awful, I'm sure, just knowing that he thinks that you, his loving mum or dad, let's say, that you are actually making his suffering worse. 'How could you?', his eyes seem to be shouting. But, however traumatic it is for you, you understand better that he can, that the pain of that injection is necessary for his eventual well-being.

May be, just may be, that can help us, if we think of ourselves as like the child, and God as the one who cares for our well-being in the longer term - cares so much that He's even prepared to use pain when necessary. The author C.S. Lewis, who lost his wife to cancer early on in their marriage, put it like this: 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.' That may not be the reason for your pain, but many would say they'd be poorer without it.

But even if God can use it for good purposes, He Himself still does know what pain feels like. When Pan Am flight 103 was blown out of the sky in 1988 by a suspected terrorist bomb over another Scottish town, Lockerbie, a reporter on the scene for a BBC Radio 4 interview turned against the local minister: 'Where is your God now? What comfort can you offer these people?' I shall never forget his reply: 'Our God has joined us in suffering'.

Yes, in the death of Jesus, He certainly has. In my poetry collection I find the words of Edward Shillito helpful. He wrote, while viewing the destruction of the Great War: 'to our wounds only God's wounds can speak and not a god has wounds' except He who 'did stumble to a throne', even 'Jesus of the scars'.

Pain and suffering is at the heart of the Christian message, but it's not only human pain: it's also the pain of God. What do we mean by that? Firstly, God's anger against sin causes pain. Compare our feelings of revulsion and righteous indignation upon hearing the news of Dunblane. Then there is the fact that God loves the sinner whose sin He hates. Every parent has known this tension when disciplining their child: the 'this hurts me more than you' syndrome. And, of course, the physical pain of the Cross experience, where Jesus died to pay the price of human rebellion - rebellion which has brought nothing but misery upon ourselves. God is the God of Calvary. He chooses to empathize and to join us in suffering by a deliberate act, so that He might offer us forgiveness for our sins and a place in an unending future when pain and suffering will be a thing of the past.

God has responded to a world of suffering. He could not have identified Himself more strongly than through the cross. If we meet Him there, as He wants us to, He offers not debating points, but practical support and resources.