

Suffering

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Introduction

The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality comments "suffering is linked inevitably to the problem of evil" (Downey, 1993, 952). Hence there is a need to have some sense of the problem of evil when probing the mystery of innocent suffering. In *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Richard Sparks describes suffering as:

Any experience that impinges on an individual's or a community's sense of well-being. Synonyms include pain, grief, distress, disruption, affliction, imposition, oppression, discrimination, and any sense of loss or being victimized. The negative experience may be physical, psychological, interpersonal, or spiritual, though in most instances it involves a combination of these (Sparks, in Downey, ed, 1993, 950).

If the relationship to God has been distant before an intense experience of suffering, then there can be a fear of God. If the prior relationship has been close, then a feeling of anger and a sense of abandonment can predominate. It is important to realize that protest is an act of faith, and that it is employed by the psalmists, by Job and by Jesus of Nazareth when he was on the cross.

A Cry of Protest

How Long, O Lord?

How long must I wait for your deliverance O Lord?
When will I be freed from my afflictions?
I lie in bed and sleep will not come
I wake in the morning and cannot move from exhaustion
My dreams crumble into dust and my life is a chasing of the wind

I see others in the streets, laughter on their lips and eyes that dance
My lip trembles and tears flood my face
Who will be by my side on this journey of life?
I am alone in my sorrow

Hope flees like a leaf in the breeze, fluttering just beyond my reach

Where did I go?

Where is the little girl with the shining ponytail and the song in her heart?

She is a vapour, a shadow of yesterday

And she that remains is a weary soul aged beyond her years

Wracked by disappointment and hidden terror

How long O Lord?

Will there be an answer?

Do I have the strength to go on without one?¹

For Group Reflection/Sharing

Is there a personal narrative/experience of suffering that stands out for you?

Suffering as Understood by Dorothee Sollee

Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, speaks of the Passion narratives as a locus for speaking of God and suffering. She notes: "They were written for our instruction" (Soelle, 1975, 139). In these accounts there emerges a theology of the cross. In this Christian context, Soelle states: "the soul is open to suffering, abandons itself to suffering, holds back nothing" (101). She explains her premise that "God is always with the one who is suffering (which) entails not only consolation but also strengthening" (102). She also points out that, for the Christian, there is a sense of consent in the taking on of suffering as part of the human condition, "thus making it more active than passive" (103).

Soelle speaks about extreme suffering which causes one to become so isolated and hopeless that one sinks into total apathy (68). It is most difficult to comprehend this mystery and we are often rendered silent before it. In the face of this temptation, our Christian faith still proclaims "I am with you" (Matt. 28:20), although, I would add, quite often pain and protest are involved with the stance of faith.

Of great relevance to this issue is the choice which Soelle sees as offered to the sufferer. She examines what a person does with unbearable suffering, and she notes that: "Either the person represses it, becomes outwardly indifferent and remains as mute as before, or he becomes sick -- or he begins to work on the suffering" (70).

¹ Poem by Donna Mann

She relates that the first phase of suffering manifests itself in muteness, powerlessness and the totally inward-turned stance of isolation which are immediate reactions to extreme suffering (73). The second phase involves "pressing beyond" the language of suffering "toward change" (72). The immense and necessary process here is both to find and to use the language of lament, to express the total dismay that is being experienced (70). This is the stance which the biblical figure Job took in his need to express an emotion which was so powerfully painful that it seemed to erupt from his very soul. Soelle refers to Gethsemane and the lament of Jesus, whose experience of suffering, she stresses, is not exclusive, but rather, "which can befall anyone" (82). Jesus, as do almost all who suffer extremely, encountered "the experience of being forsaken by God" (85). Jesus did not stay in his feeling of abandonment but rather moved through protest to an acceptance in faith, the third and final phase in processing extreme suffering (73). This stance enables people to survive the suffering, and, in the case of palliative care patients, to live until the moment they die. This acceptance in faith appears to allow them to believe that God is with them, suffers with them, and will never leave them alone. There have been instances in which a patient will turn away from the suffering in one sense, by condemning the self rather than risk anger at God, which adds to the suffering.

Dorothee Soelle's three phases of suffering are extremely useful and pertinent to spiritual care and counselling. She says that the first phase of muteness and powerlessness is a phase which is shared by all who suffer. The second and third phases are not engaged in by all who suffer.

Question

Would this process of suffering offer a sign of the presence of God? Does it assist you in reflecting on the mystery of suffering?

Reflection

It does not really matter to whom they protest: the importance lies in the act of protest itself, and in the release which is often present in the aftermath of this protest.

Suffering as Understood by Douglas John Hall

In his book, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, Douglas Hall posits that Christianity, to which he refers as "the tradition of Jerusalem" (Hall, 1986, 19), holds out two basic affirmations of the human condition:

The first is that suffering is real and is the existential lot of "fallen" humanity...The second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore that it need not and must not become our preoccupation, the object of our ultimate concern, for...the Word of God will stand forever.

For one who is actively experiencing deep suffering, such as a person who is facing a life-threatening illness, it is often most difficult to remember the moments of joy which have also been present in his/her life. I have observed that some palliative patients can see beyond their suffering to the extent that Douglas Hall can. Hall notes that there is the hope to which we are called as Christians (22). This hope tells us that there is more in life than suffering, for God also is present.

In examining the suffering of the historical Jesus, Hall notes that both the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds, which contain the fundamental beliefs of our Christian faith, refer to the life of Jesus as one of suffering: "who was born, suffered, died and rose" (1986, 32). Hall notes that: "This was the primitive Christian way of saying that in order fully to identify himself with the human species it was necessary for the incarnate Logos to become a broken man" (33). The gospel accounts themselves relate that "The Son of Man must suffer," in order to fully enter the human condition as Emmanuel, God with us (33). This identification of those who suffer can assist those Christians who suffer bodily from diseases such as heart disease, cancer, strokes, kidney failure, etc. Douglas Hall refers to the passion and resurrection of Jesus as being central to the Christian response to suffering when he states that:

The gospel of Jesus as the cross-bearer, the bearer of unbearable burdens, introduces all who hear it to a process: the process of bearing the burdens of others. To know that God participates in human suffering -- really to know this -- is to do it! (121)

For Hall, Jesus is God who loves us to the extent that he became one of us and took on suffering, died and rose from the dead to give us eternal life. The question now becomes, "Who is Jesus as God for the palliative patients?"

Question:

Is the sense of Jesus as God who suffered and died for us, a comfort to those who now suffer? If so, how is this helpful to us as spiritual caregivers and therapists?

Suffering as Understood by Sally McFague

Sally McFague, examines "Jesus as Lover" in her work, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987). She sees Jesus as being passionate, enduring and faithful in his love for humanity (1987, 125). This love led him to choose active participation in the paschal mystery (132). This love of Jesus, referred to by McFague and Soelle could be the beginning of a working response to the mysteries of evil and of innocent suffering.

Karl Rahner, a twentieth-century Jesuit theologian, ponders the reality of suffering as a mystery when he states:

The acceptance of suffering without an answer other than the incomprehensibility of God and his freedom is the concrete form in which we accept God himself and allow him to be God (Rahner, 1983, 207).

It seems that one cannot understand this statement without completing the three-phase journey of suffering referred to by Soelle. With the completion of the phases of muteness and of protest, this acceptance in faith of the incomprehensibility of God and the sure presence of God with us in our suffering can enable the sufferer to allow God to be God. Rahner's statement, as quoted above, addresses the reality that while God does not send suffering (as was the thrust of the theology of temporal retribution), God does allow suffering to occur in this world. Why? Rahner would say, because God is God and the reasoning behind this reality is a mystery.

Rahner also notes that God is the only "blessed light to illumine the dark abyss of suffering" (Rahner, 1983, 208). So God lights the way of the one who suffers, even though that person may not be aware of this reality. It is the presence of God, the "blessed light" which is referred to by Rahner, which makes the suffering something shared by God - ultimately a journey in faith, so that the sufferer does not endure physical, emotional and spiritual pain alone.

Question

Can the one suffering "allow God to be God"? Or is the pain too great to think in such lofty theological terms? Can I as the caregiver "allow God to be God" as Rahner asserts?

Summary

Suffering, as the evil of misfortune, is a mystery, and is a great challenge and, at times, an experience of crisis for spiritual care givers, chaplains, pastoral counsellors and therapists. The need for the professional is to be open to the questions which arise from the many experiences of suffering which are encountered in the ministry setting. It is crucial to have a consultative relationship - a spiritual director, a fellow chaplain or counsellor, a supervisor, etc. with whom we can share our questions, our protests, our fears, and our faith. Spending time in prayer and/or reflection is also very necessary. We need to take our questions, concerns, and, at times, our own experience of suffering and sit with this in quiet, and have conversation with our God, Holy One, or our wise centre; however we might understand transcendence. Then we can see what suffering can tell us, and we can learn.

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