Reflections for Christmas Season: Suffering of the Innocents. – by Rob 30rd December 2020



Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer regularly providing video resources. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone we usually meditate at 7.30pm every Wednesday (in our own homes at present). The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer, which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,[a] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." Matthew 2.16.

Whether or not this actually happened - and it is not recorded in the other Gospels - we are shocked to read of such horror particularly just after the joy and goodwill of Christmas - a reminder of the dark side of life in the middle of our celebrating and revelling. Some may ask "Why does God allow innocent children to suffer?"

My first-born daughter suffered a lot in her short life from cruelly painful seizures and disability. The only reason she suffered was that she had been born with disability. Birth into this world risks the possibility of many causes of suffering from illnesses and conditions to natural disasters and cruel treatment by others. None of us can escape completely.

So we might think that it is pointless to ask why. But we still do in an effort to make some sense of the world and, for Christians it may be important to understand the role of God in it, and in our lives.

The 'Bad Christian' Approach: This is a difficult subject, but I think one of the most honest attempts to address it was made by the Rev. Dave Tomlinson in his book "How to be a bad Christian...and a better human being". Having given one chapter, the sub-title "how to make sense of suffering", he continues:

"OK, I admit it: the title of this chapter is a bit of a swizz. I don't really know how to make sense of suffering. And, actually, I don't know anyone who does. People far smarter than me have written tomes on the subject without coming up with a satisfactory answer, so why should I fare any better?

Yet the question will not go away. How can it? Every day our screens are filled with heart-wrenching images and stories of meaningless pain and torment that we feel helpless to do anything about. Then there is our own suffering, and that of people we know and love.

Whether far away or close at hand, suffering is just horribly perplexing. 'Why?' 'Why them?' 'Why me?' 'Why anyone?'

However, the last thing we need - the last thing most of us want - is neat and tidy, smarty-pants answers, especially when we are in the very throes of dealing with a sudden death, a terminal illness, a pointless tragedy. I confess to entertaining homicidal reactions to people I hear spouting self-assured explanations for other people's misery, particularly when it is spoken from a pulpit! The only response that makes any sense is silence, silent presence.

Yet the truly stunning thing, the most awe-inspiring, is the resilience with which so many people deal with suffering and pain: people who doubtless feel anything but resilient on the inside, yet somehow carry on loving, giving and hoping in the face of personal desolation."

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer tells one of the most moving accounts of struggling with evil and suffering in his book 'Night' which is a devastating account of his experience with his father in the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

He recounts an episode where two men and a child are hanged in the camp before the eyes of the assembled prisoners. The men cry 'Long live liberty!' and die quickly. The child is quiet.

'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon the sun was setting.

...The two adults were no longer alive...but the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive...For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes…

Behind me I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?'

And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows…'

That night the soup tasted of corpses.

As the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann points out, Wiesel describes this horrifying reality in highly symbolic terms. The child is described as 'an angel with sad eyes'. The three murdered victims and the setting sun remind us of the death of that other Jew, Jesus, on Golgotha. But the soup that tasted of corpses

does not point to any Easter. The answer to the question 'Where is God?' comes through 'a voice within me', like the voice of God in a prophet.

But what does the voice disclose? What is Wiesel actually saying about this alarming event? It can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may indicate that God is the victim; that God dies there, once and for all, in the innocent child with the sad eyes. In other words, in the face of such a horror, it is impossible to continue believing in God. Wiesel writes, 'I shall never forget the moments which murdered my God and my soul. I shall never forget the flames which consumed my faith for ever.'

The other possible interpretation is that God is present in the child's suffering; that where that child suffers torment, God also is tormented; where that child dies, God also suffers the child's death. 'If I make my bed in Sheol [hell], you are there,' says the psalmist. God was there, in the hell of Auschwitz, but not as the Almighty, the Lord of history, but as a victim among millions of victims. And the Jewish child did not die alone, was not forsaken by God. God suffered with him.

Elie Wiesel, summing up the story, concludes, 'We cannot understand it with God. And we cannot understand it without him.'

I think both interpretations make sense in their different ways. When a father whose daughter had been raped and murdered cried out, 'Don't talk to me about God!' something deep inside me said, 'Yes. I agree.' But then I am also faced with the likes of Gordon Wilson, who held his daughter's hand as she lay dying after the Enniskillen bombing, whose faith in God was unshaken by what happened. Recounting her last words, 'Daddy, I love you so much', he goes on to say, 'But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge…she is in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for those men tonight and every night.'

The most basic way to make sense of suffering is to be honest with yourself and God. Discover a religion of the gut, not of the mind. It's no use pretending, no use saying the 'right' words, no use contorting our emotions or simply trying to adopt a good 'Christian' outlook. We have to be emotionally authentic."

Reflection: The answer given to Job when he questioned his suffering, was that he had no real knowledge of the world, its wonders and mysteries and how they came to be; and he acknowledges "Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not." Job 42.3. And this points to a truth. On the cross, Jesus prays "Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do!" In a sense Pontius Pilate and the baying crowd did know, but it was on a superficial intellectual level. True knowing involves making a empathetic connection which means giving up a little of ourselves and entering into the experience of the other - compassion.

This what Dave Tomlinson means when he refers to God suffering with the child in the concentration camp and to our need to be emotionally honest. In our spiritual quest we are struggling to understand, and this is at the core of what it is to be human, in fact what it means to be a living being. By relating and connecting we grow in understanding and love, but it is a slow process. The persecutors of Jesus and the Nazis who were able to stand by and watch their cruel murder of the child had not made that connection. But even they had a rudimentary knowing somewhere in the depth of their being - an uncomfortable consciousness that something was missing. As a result, they were likely, eventually, to suffer for a long time, and much more than their victims. But that is not a matter for satisfaction. Rather, it is a reason for praying that they will go on to come to that true realisation and connection, as the father did when his daughter had been killed by the Enniskillen bomb.

Meditation: So let us now find a comfortable position for our period of meditation, becoming aware of the pressure of our body on our seat and our legs or feet on the floor. Keeping our back straight, holding our head upright with the chin slightly tucked in. Becoming aware of any points of tension or discomfort in the body and relaxing into them. Letting go of all that has happened during the day, whether it has been pleasurable or difficult. Becoming aware of all our friends and fellow pilgrims who are meditating with us, although it may be remotely. Holding for a moment in our hearts the suffering in the world, those who are suffering for no fault of their own, and holding also in our hearts all those who out of ignorance and fear

perpetrate suffering and who have not yet come to the realisation that in doing so they also harm themselves.

Now, turning our attention to our breathing, noting its natural movement without trying to change it. Coming into a place of calm and of ease. Becoming aware of our word or meditation object, and following it lightly; noticing thoughts and sensory experiences as they arise, letting thm go and returning gently to the meditation object.

We will meditate for 25 minutes.

Post Meditation Poem: Toys by Abraham Sutzkever

Written in Israel in 1956, This poem is a moving elegy to the child victims of the Holocaust. In urging his young daughter, born after the war, to cherish her playthings. The poem is given added poignancy with the knowledge that Sutzkever's own newborn son was murdered by the Nazis in 1942.

My daughter, you must care for your toys,
Poor things, they're even smaller than you.
Every night, when the fire goes to sleep,
Cover them with the stars of the tree.

Let the golden pony graze
The cloudy sweetness of the field.
Lace up the little boy's boots
When the sea-eagle blows cold.

Tie a straw hat on your doll
And put a bell in her hand.
For not one of them has a mother,
And so they cry out to God.

Love them, your little princesses—
I remember a cursed night
When there were dolls left in all seven streets
Of the city. And not one child.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**
Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.