

sat in her room surrounded by flowers, classical music playing on a tape recorder – and gasping for breath. There are many things one can do for breathlessness, but when the lungs are taken over by tumour there comes a point when there is nothing one can do and people die of lack of oxygen. I sat on the bed with my arm lightly round her heaving shoulders as she asked in despair, 'Can't you *do* something?' Gently I said, 'I'm sorry – there's nothing I can do.' (I could have sedated her, but we had already discussed this and she wanted to remain alert.) She gasped out, 'Oh, *don't* say that!' The pain of moments like that is hard to bear. It would have been easier to have said, 'yes, of course', and given her a useless injection or a powerful sedative. Either of these courses would have been professionally correct, but quite wrong for her. Gasping for breath, and blue as she was, she had a magnificent dignity, sitting imperiously with her husband and lover, friends flying in from abroad to bid her farewell. Hers was a death I would be glad to die – a hard bitter agony, but in control to the last.

Slowly, as the years go by, I learn about the importance of powerlessness. I experience it in my own life and I live with it in my work. The secret is not to be afraid of it – not to run away. The dying know we are not God. They accept that we cannot halt the process of cancer, the inexorable march of that terrible army that takes over a human body like an occupying force, pillaging, raping, desecrating without respect and without quarter. All they ask is that we do not desert them: that we stand our ground at the foot of the cross. At this stage of the journey, of being there, of simply being: it is, in many ways, the hardest part.

Why Me?

*Since I have lost all taste for life,
I will give free rein to my complaints;
I shall let my embittered soul speak out.
I shall say to God, Do not condemn me,
but tell me the reason for your assault.*

Job 10:1–2

One of the effects of the constant exposure to pain and death involved in the care of the dying is that one is forced to grapple not only with the 'problem of evil', but with God himself. I believe that our spiritual attitude to suffering is crucial because it not only determines the way we relate to those for whom we care but our very survival as carers. If our attitude is illogical because of ignorance or a flawed theology, we run the risk of being so overwhelmed by pain that we 'burnout'. If, however, we are able to maintain a paschal overview, keeping the resurrection in the same perspective as the cross, then our inevitable human sadness will be tempered by the joy we experience in our faith in the loving purposes of God.

The prophet Micah tells us that, not only must we act justly and love tenderly but we must *walk humbly* with God. What does it mean to walk humbly with God? Does it mean genuflecting properly in church? Not swearing? Being respectful to the clergy? Not arguing the toss about contraception and fish on Fridays? If that is what it means then I am guilty of even more arrogance and pride than I had thought, and may the Lord have mercy upon me. No, I see humility more in terms of stance before God, a way of being rather than a code behaviour.

For those involved in caring, Micah's counsel of humility makes particular demands. It asks that we bow down before

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the mystery of suffering, allowing our comforting theological idols to be shattered into a thousand pieces. It teaches us to acknowledge our human frailty with joy and laughter, and to rejoice in, not resent, our need for each other. And lastly, it forces upon us the realisation that we must pay more than lip service to our need for God. If our Christianity is to be anything more than a convenient label, we must expose ourselves to the transforming power of God in prayer and in the scriptures.

My own childish conceptions of God were dynamited by the experience of living for a year at a Benedictine monastery, where the monks politely but ruthlessly destroyed many of my idols. It was at Ampleforth that I was introduced to the writing of Annie Dillard, the young American woman who won the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for literature with her enchanting book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. My monastic friends found Dillard fascinating because she grapples with the mystery of God and suffering with a marvellous directness and vitality and in a style that is totally devoid of sentimentality. I have come back to Dillard again and again over the years, partly because I love her use of language but also because, informed by Eckhart, she makes more theological sense to me than most people. In the following passage from a later book she engages head on in the why of suffering:

His disciples asked Christ about a roadside beggar who had been blind from birth. 'Who did sin, that man or his parents, that he was born blind?' And Christ, who spat on the ground, made mud of his spittle and clay, plastered the mud over the man's eyes, and gave him sight, answered, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.' Really? If we take this answer to refer to the affliction itself – and not the subsequent cure – as 'God's works made manifest', then we have, along with 'Not as the world gives do I give unto you' two meagre, baffling answers to one of the few questions worth asking, to wit 'What in the Sam Hill is going on here?' (Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*)

What is going on here? Why do the good suffer? Does God deliberately *inflict* suffering, or does he, as is suggested in Job, *permit* it? Could it really be that he is powerless to prevent it?

Does he suffer *with* us or *in* us or is he some sort of loving

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but impotent spectator at the agony of the world? These and many similar questions are what religious people mean when they talk of the 'problem of evil'.

I was brought sharply face to face with these questions during my time in Chile, but more especially when, in 1981, a friend of mine was murdered in El Salvador. Ita Ford, an American missionary sister in her early forties was killed by the secret police along with two other American sisters and a lay missionary called Jean Donovan. At the funeral of the two Maryknoll sisters Melinda Roper, then head of the congregation, gave the panegyric. One of the things she said has been enormously helpful in my understanding of how to cope with my own and other people's problems about suffering and evil. In her sermon she spoke about suffering as PROBLEM and suffering as MYSTERY. By suffering as *problem*, she meant the call to feed the hungry, to protect the orphan, to care for the sick and to work for justice. Suffering as *mystery*, however, concerns the cry which rises from the heart of those who suffer injustice or misfortune: the inevitable WHY? WHY ME? WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS? This is *the* classic question about the 'problem of evil' – the question which is always addressed to those who dare to profess any kind of a faith. How should we answer it? Should we even begin to try?

Whether or not they should, religious people *do* try to answer these questions, though they come to some very different answers. I became aware of this a couple of years ago when I was speaking at a conference on the church's healing ministry to the dying. I found, to my surprise, that the conference members (doctors, nurses and clergy) were split into two groups: those who believed in a concept of cosmic struggle in which the powers of evil personified in the devil were at war with the powers of goodness personified in Christ; the other group, in which I found myself infinitely more at home, believed in a God who, somehow, had his world totally in hand.

I had not realised until I went to that meeting how much a person's God-concept or belief structure influences the way he or she relates to those who suffer. Those who believe that illness is caused by the devil will feel they must lay siege to heaven with their prayers and mobilise all the angels and saints to intercede on their behalf. If they are Catholics they

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will enlist the help of the Carmelites or other enclosed nuns whose prayers they believe to be more powerful than their own. If they belong to other denominations they may start up a prayer chain, telephoning all their friends and their friends' friends. They may even call in someone with a special gift of healing who will come and lay hands upon the sick person, driving out the evil spirits. When David Watson, a well known Evangelical minister, was ill two friends in the healing ministry flew in from America to pray over him. In *Fear no Evil*, the story of his illness, Watson describes the visit of his friends:

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After some time of praise and worship, Blaine became aware of the activity of the Holy Spirit and laid hands upon my abdomen. The three of them went on, praying, cursing the cancer in the name of Christ, commanding it to wither, and then they claimed God's healing in my body . . . John Wimber warned me that sometimes, in his experience, a tumour will grow after a time of prayer, until it begins to wither and die.

'It might well be that the next scan or two will reveal cancer in your liver, a cancer that is growing. But I believe that the root of it has now been cut. And soon it will begin to die.'

David Watson died of cancer on 17 February 1984, just over a year from diagnosis.

What are we to make of those who claim, like these men, that, through prayer, cancer can be healed? I must admit to being very sceptical over the healing issue. I do not doubt for one moment that God has the power to heal – nor do I discount the gospel miracles, but I believe that God rarely exercises this power in the ordinary run of things. I have no quarrel with those who pray for healing, as long as the people praying leave God and the person prayed for some room for manoeuvre. The difficulties arise when the person involved in the healing promises a cure, or when those praying become convinced that God is going to work a miracle especially for them.

I had experience of this not long ago when a patient I was treating was pressured to go and see a healer. Apparently the healers concerned had heard about her and rang up some mutual friends saying they felt 'called' to heal her. They came

and prayed over her and told her that the cancer would go. Luckily the woman herself, who had come to a marvellous degree of acceptance about her illness, was only slightly thrown off balance, but her daughter, a fragile girl who was coping with the situation with great difficulty, became terribly upset.

Another belief with which I have difficulty is that God can heal us if our faith is strong enough. There is undeniably a scriptural basis for this, but it is difficult to reconcile with the fact that so many prayers from people with deep faith are frankly not answered. I become concerned when people are made to feel that their failure to be healed is somehow *their* fault – that their faith is not strong enough or they are somehow blocking the power of God. I find it impossible to believe in a God whose power can be blocked by *anything*, human or demonic.

While on this issue of guilt, we should not forget that there are still people who believe that illness is a punishment for sin. I have never actually met anyone who asserts this, but have been indirectly concerned with two instances. The first was when a patient rang a healer and was told over the telephone that she must be a very wicked woman to have breast cancer – and the second was one of our own volunteers who decided to 'counsel' a patient at the hospice, telling her she should mend her ways and set her house in order. I would like to have had the chance of meeting these 'healers'. The dying can do without that sort of evil corruption of the Christian message.

I find it difficult to understand just what is the theology behind this kind of prayer. Do they believe in a God who is just holding his own in the struggle with evil, or one who has to be placated, persuaded to stay his hand? Do they believe in what some people call the Watchmaker God – a creator who has set his world in motion and then sits as a curious bystander, watching people die in agony or slaughter each other? Most of all, do they believe in a *partisan* God who loves the church-going Christian more than the atheist, the virtuous more than the sinner?

A great breakthrough for me in my understanding of God came as a result of my contact with the church in Latin America. It was there that I became acquainted with the concept of a God who takes special delight in the ANAWIM,

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the marginalised, the little people. If God is partisan, his predilection is surely for the poor, the humanly unlovable and the sinner.

Let us explore how this works out in practice: in the hospice where I work, we have two women dying of cancer. Beth is a good Christian lady, a pillar of her local church, beloved by everyone. The locker beside her bed is crowded with flowers, the wall covered with cards and her friends are at her bedside at all hours of the day. It is not surprising, for she is truly a lovely lady, brave and charming, radiating joy to all of us. And in the other bed is Mary, a young prostitute dying of cancer of the cervix. The tumour has eroded into her bowels and bladder so she is constantly wet and dirty. Mary has almost no visitors – certainly no friends. Her man has left her for a younger woman and her thirteen year old daughter is already 'on the game'. Poor Mary. She is her own worst enemy. She is selfish and demanding and quite blatantly manipulating all of us. It is hard to forgive the fact that just two weeks ago she was cruelly vindictive to the young husband of another of our patients who was dying. But somewhere, underneath the brittle façade of this degraded woman, there is a spark of gentleness and a delicious humour. If things had been different, if she had been loved for herself long, long ago, who knows how she might have flowered.

I do not want to go into a sociological study of how these two women's circumstances have moulded them, but rather look at them with what I understand to be God's eyes. One only has to think of the God of Hosea who lures the unfaithful wife into the wilderness so that he may speak to her heart, to realise the special love God has for the sinner:

That is why I am going to block her way with thorns,
and wall her in so that she cannot find her way;
she will chase after her lovers and never catch up with them,
she will search for them and never find them.
Then she will say, I will go back to my husband,
I was happier then than I am today . . .
That is why I am going to lure her
and lead her out into the wilderness
and speak to her heart.

Hos. 2:8–9,16

In the New Testament too, there is an abundance of stories

to illustrate God's love for the weak and sinful. The most famous are the woman taken in adultery and the Good Shepherd. One can picture so well the woman dragged naked from her bed, standing terrified and humiliated before the excited crowd.

The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in full view of everybody, they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What have you to say?' (John 8:3–5)

We know the story well, of course; how Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees by asking that whoever amongst them was without sin should cast the first stone. And then, when they had all slunk away and he was left alone with the woman, he neither rebuked nor condemned her but said 'go away and don't sin any more'.

In the story of the Good Shepherd the virtuous sheep are left singing hymns in church while the shepherd goes out into the hills or down into the dark alleys of the inner city to search out and bring back in triumph the one who was lost. This is the God I meet in the gospels and the God I meet in those pastors who seem to me to be worthy of the name. It is the God who has come to save not the virtuous but the sinner.

How then, do we imagine God copes with our prayers, or lack of them, for his people? What does he do with the prayers for Beth's healing? How on earth can we know? I am quite sure that it is right that we pray for those we love – and for those we hate – and I believe deep in my heart that no prayer is lost. On the other hand I find it impossible to believe that those who have no one to pray for them are somehow disadvantaged – that would surely be a monstrous injustice. Perhaps our prayers are shared out, like alms, at some great sorting office, being distributed to those who need them most. Or perhaps our all powerful, all loving, all knowing, transcendent God has the whole world in his hands, and we pray more from our own need than from his.

A few weeks before he died from cancer the broadcaster Robert Foxcroft said something like this: