

God our Father?

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on 29th July 2007, by Rev'd Pauline Main, based on Gen 18:20-32 and Luke 11:1-13

Genesis 18: 20-32

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ²⁶ And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹ He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Luke 11: 1-13

¹ He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone
indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

⁵ And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;' ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Sermon

“Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” [Gen 18:22, 23]

There is a strand of thinking in the scriptures which sees disaster and disease in terms of divine punishment. The prophets continually warn the people of Israel that they will feel God's wrath if they do not mend their ways. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which appears in Genesis chapter 19, speaks of God destroying those cities because of their wickedness, and it is an ancient tale with this kind of thinking.

The kind of thinking which sees the hand of God in tragedy, acting in retribution, or at least capriciously, is still around - for example a recent newspaper article I read following the tragic death of Polish pilgrims in a bus crash had God “pointing the finger” and choosing who should live and who should die.

Jesus challenges this attitude. Jesus' disciples ask about a blind man, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind”. Jesus is quick to emphasise that no one sinned, but that God's glory would be shown in the healing [see John 9:2,3]. Jesus' healing miracles in general challenge this idea of disease or trouble as a punishment from God, and it is challenged also by an Old Testament writer in the passage we heard from Genesis 18 [Gen 18:20-32].

The text now reads “Abraham was standing before the Lord”, but early manuscripts of this passage had God standing before Abraham. It is God, the Judge, who is in the dock, as Abraham questions and rebukes him.

Abraham has two questions

- will God destroy the innocent with the guilty? [v23]
- an underlying question - “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” [v25]

These are not just theoretical, scholars' questions but were important for the people of Israel. It is likely that at the time this passage was written they were suffering, because the nation had been conquered by Babylon and many of the people were in exile. They were asking “Why?”, and, “Where is God?”

Our society is more technologically advanced, more sophisticated perhaps, but the questions remain when disaster strikes. - Why do the innocent suffer?

As we've noted, conventional Old Testament wisdom said that God would punish the wicked, and as a by-product, the innocent might suffer with them. But the writer of Genesis 18 turns this round and examines the possibility that the innocent - the righteous few - can be the means of saving the many.

He asks God -

- Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city - will you destroy it?
- Suppose there are only forty-five ... ?
- Suppose there are only ten ... ?

It leads us to the possibility that **even one** can be the means of salvation.

The writer of Genesis, through the mouth of Abraham, bases his argument on to the holiness of God. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!" [v25]. "Far be it from you." A better translation, says Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, is "That is profane". In other words, to slay the righteous with the wicked - a holy God could not do it!

God's character

So - what is at issue here is the character of God.

Jesus in his parables about prayer [Luke 11:5-13] tell us more about that.

The first parable [vv 5-8] can be a bit misleading. It is not that God is the like the householder, reluctant be disturbed and open the door; it is making a contrast. Jesus is saying that if even a man who has shut his house up for the night, with his family in bed is eventually willing to disturb them to help a neighbour, how much more so will God answer our cries for help.

Then Jesus takes this still further. The pattern of prayer which he has given to the disciples [*The Lord's Prayer*, Luke 11: 1-4] begins with addressing God intimately, as Father, dad, and in the second parable [Luke 11: 9-13] Jesus moves on to emphasise this character of God, as a loving parent who knows his children's needs and gives them good things.

So, where does this sit with our thinking about innocent suffering? Can we take the analogy further to help us understand the huge questions we were thinking about earlier? One or two pointers, perhaps -

- **children don't always see the bigger picture.** Parents say "no" for a reason. We don't understand all of God's purposes, or the whole sweep of creation over time and eternity. So we need to be wary before we "judge" God. We don't know everything.

But - whilst I think this is a valid insight, I have to say that I don't think this is an "explanation" for suffering. We return here to Abraham's argument in the debate between him and God. Even sinful humans can abhor suffering and realise that it would not be right for a holy God to inflict it, or even to allow it if it could be prevented. I don't see suffering as part of God's purposes.

- **parents take a risk in giving their children freedom and responsibility.** This gets us closer to understanding the presence of accident, disaster, disease in the creation/world. Human beings have been given **choice**, and we seem very good at choosing the way which is most harmful and least helpful. So - we can see some of the reason for the suffering caused by violence and war, but also some of the "natural" disasters which are being caused by the way we are all affecting the environment. Paul talks about the creation "groaning", and we are seeing some of this, I suggest - perhaps even in our Oxford floods. And the innocent suffer - those who feel the

effects are not necessarily those who are causing most environmental damage; and they are not “selected” by God - Botley is no more or less wicked than North Oxford, I suggest!

But also - more positively, God created a world in which there is **change and growth** in the natural world. The world is not static. Living things evolve. There is a cycle of life - there is death, but it allows therefore for new life, new possibilities. And within that the possibility of things going awry - disease, disability ... accident.

- parents are distressed when their children suffer

When I was a youngster we played out in the street for hours. Are children allowed to do that now? We hear these days of how children are being over-protected, not allowed to go places on their own, because of parents’ fears of the society we live in. Parents have a dilemma - how to protect their children.

This is also God’s dilemma. The world is as he made it - with all the consequences that has brought. These things are also God’s problem God is a loving Father, not a distant despot.

Perhaps that takes us back to Genesis 18, to Abraham’s questioning of God, to the possibility that **even one** can be the means of salvation, to Christ on the cross, where God suffers with us, as parents suffer with their children.

Hope

This sermon got me into deep water. I was tempted to finish at this point. But the Christian gospel doesn’t finish with the cross, but with resurrection and hope.

The hope for our world in our passages today are, I think, the pictures in the parables of God the loving Father, who hears our cries and knows our needs - this is the underlying “spirit” of the universe, says Jesus.

And that through God responding to our cries, coming in Christ, somehow, the groaning creation is being made whole.