

Lent Reflection: Suffering

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world”.

So says C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*, in which he argues that he is not attempting to justify suffering but only “to solve the intellectual problem raised by [it]”.¹ So it is vital that the quotation that heads this page is understood as a means of intellectualising suffering, rather than an attempt to justify it from a religious (and indeed, Lewis’ own Christian) perspective.

Because the presence of suffering in our world does raise serious questions: about God, about the nature of humanity. In short, it is one of the oldest and most perplexing questions ever encountered. From the Biblical (Ruth) to the philosophical (Swinburne), from Holocaust theology (Wiesel) to Christian theology (C.S. Lewis), people have tried to explain, or intellectualize, suffering. Iraeneus spoke of suffering as “soul-making”; that is, it makes us better people, yet this seems so unjust.

I rather like Lewis’ angle on things. I’m sure it can be interpreted in many ways, but I have often looked at it this way: the *our* which Lewis speaks of should not just be understood in terms of ‘my own’ suffering, but also in the collective way, the suffering of our world and the people in it. God can speak to us through sufferings. This may be through our own personal sufferings, perhaps in grief or in sadness, or through the collective sufferings of communities, such as those who are persecuted for their religious beliefs. It may even be through universal suffering, such as those which come about as a result of natural disasters. Understanding the line *our pains* in a multi-faceted way ensures that suffering is God’s megaphone – he alerts us to one of the aspects of our common humanity, that all people suffer, but also that all people are capable of, and indeed have a duty towards, helping those who *are* suffering.

Sharing in each others’ suffering is not only being encouraging to a friend or loved one in need, but it is following in Christ’s footsteps. Jesus healed, but more importantly, he spent time with those who suffered, listening and talking with them. And when we suffer, although it is always hard, there can be some comfort taken, perhaps, in remembering that Christ also suffered. Not just physically on the cross, but emotionally, as we remember this Holy Week that Christ prayed so earnestly on the Mount of Olives for his

¹ (Lewis,1940,p.9)

cup of suffering to be taken from him, that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground”. One of the real beauties of Christian faith is knowing that Christ also knows what it means to suffer; he knew ‘the pangs of human sufferings’ and he also ministered to those who were in pain, be that in body, mind or spirit. Let us be more like Christ this Easter, remembering the suffering of others and reaching out to those who hurt. The problem of pain lies not in justifying it, but in dealing with it, and through following Jesus’ example in ministering to those who suffer, we will surely see the beauty of our God in the land of the living².

² A reference to Psalm 27:13