

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 20

Wednesday 13th May 2020

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. The question of ‘Why does God allow this pandemic?’ is one that many of us have been asking. Anna begins a short midweek series on this topic by looking at the problem of evil.

Please do get in touch with Anna if you have any thoughts or further questions which you wish to raise on this. Her email is curate@camelotparishes.org.uk

Scripture Passage

Genesis 1-3 (abridged)

1 ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the

woman, “You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves...

²¹ And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Reflection

‘The problem of evil’

A short caveat before we start: this mini-series is not intended to explain the existence of evil and the ongoing suffering in our world. Sorry! This is something that people have been discussing and debating for literally thousands of years. Instead, may it lead to more thinking and questioning and exploring, in a healthy and helpful way. In the words of Nobel Prize winner Paul Samuelson, ‘Good questions outrank easy answers.’

As we go through life we become more and more aware that some aspects of life are ‘very good’ (Genesis 1.31), but other aspects are very bad. There is joy, beauty and wonder, but there is also sadness, destruction and suffering. The current coronavirus crisis makes it abundantly clear that all is not well in the world. And the fact that there is so much sadness and destruction and suffering may lead us to ask how God, who is described as being love (1 John 4.8), could allow this. Some may even begin to doubt the existence of God.

The question of how a good, loving and all-powerful God could allow evil and suffering to exist is commonly referred to as 'the problem of evil'. Indeed, the existence of evil and suffering in the world is probably one of the most common reasons people give for *not* believing in God. They might say, "If God exists, and is loving and powerful, surely he'd step in and put an end to evil and suffering?". And for those of us who believe in God, we have no doubt found ourselves sometimes wishing that God would do just that. Some might say, "Maybe God isn't all-powerful, so he *can't* stop evil and suffering" or, "Maybe God isn't good or loving, so *doesn't want* to stop evil and suffering". But that isn't the God of the Bible and that isn't the God who we see revealed in Jesus. So how might we address 'the problem of evil' from a Christian perspective? (Obviously, there isn't one correct answer to this question!)

In the first chapters of Genesis, we hear how God created the world, and it was 'very good' (1.31), but Adam and Eve then disobey God and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, they realise they are naked and become ashamed, and are ultimately banished from the Garden of Eden – though not before God makes them clothes to wear. These chapters have been interpreted and understood in many ways, but I think they help us think through some key points about 'the problem of evil'.

First, God created a world that was full of goodness. God did not get to end of creation and say, "It was very bad" or "It was OK". However, things don't remain 'very good' for long; they go rapidly from very good to very bad.

So the second thing we learn is that evil and suffering become part of creation. Augustine, a fourth century African bishop, referred to evil as 'the privation of good', meaning that evil was essentially the absence of good, rather than existing in its own right. And others, such as the second century Greek bishop Irenaeus, have suggested that God deliberately created humans imperfectly so that they had the option to choose to become more like God or to choose to turn away from God. John Hick, a twentieth century philosopher, developed this idea and referred to the world as 'the vale of soul-making', meaning that through evil and suffering we are shaped into the people God wants us to be. I wonder what you think of these approaches to 'the problem of evil'?

The third thing we learn from Genesis is that God is always at work bringing goodness into creation. When Adam and Eve become ashamed that they are naked, God makes clothes for them. They may have messed up, and they will have to face the consequences of their choices, but God still loves them and cares for them, and so wants to take away the shame they feel at being naked. The existence of evil and suffering in the world does not mean that God gives up on creation; in fact, in Jesus, God takes on the evil and suffering of the world in order to initiate a renewed creation in which at last, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Revelation 21.4). However, for now, we live in a world in which there is evil and suffering, and yet we can already experience the goodness of God in so many ways, including through the goodness of others and the goodness in creation.

As I said at the start, the above is not intended to solve 'the problem of evil', but to offer some points for reflection and discussion, so here are some suggestions.

You might like to respond by...

1. Reading the whole of Genesis 1-3. Which words or phrases jump out at you? Is there anything else in these chapters that helps you think through 'the problem of evil'?
2. You might like to look up the work of Augustine, Irenaeus or John Hick. Which of their ideas do you find most and least helpful?
3. Has reading this led you to have any further thoughts or questions? You might like to share these with someone.
4. Spend some time in prayer, and tell God what you are thinking and feeling about all this.

Anna

Points for Prayers

- Thanksgiving for and celebration of Jesus' resurrection
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Need for further largescale testing
- Prayers for wisdom relating to the future of the lockdown
- Funerals needing to take place under new restrictions with only family mourners
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)