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OUR LADY IMMACULATE
TOLWORTH

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When Innocent People Suffer

One lady almost ruined her evening out at a restaurant, while struggling to find answers to the question: why should some children suffer? How is it that a child could starve to death in the arms of her mother while elsewhere another child is obese because of too much food? Why a child should care for her HIV positive dying mother while another child somewhere else spends most of his time playing computer games? Why should the children suffer so much simply because of where they happened to be born? "How can I remain a Christian Catholic" the lady asked "believing in a good and loving God?" Some people come to various inadequate conclusions. Either God is an illusion, or God is not a good God, or God is good but indifferent, or is good but he punishes us through suffering.

The frustration expressed by Job in the first reading of this Sunday is slightly similar to those of the lady at the restaurant. Job suffered huge losses; his property, animals, his health and his own children. He reached a point of desolation as he writes, "Is not man's life on earth nothing more than pressed service, his time no better than hired drudgery?" He ends with words of total despair: "Remember that my life is but a breath, and that my eyes will never again see joy." Similarly he could be questioning the whole point of faith in an almighty and good God. While we struggle with these questions, in the Gospel of this Sunday, Jesus is busy with his disciples, going "all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils." What is the point?

The lady at the restaurant left me partly frustrated as I felt powerless to make any sense to her inquisition. "After all I did theology," I

thought to myself "and I believe in a good God, and yet I have no answer." A mistake many of us make, as I did, is thinking that one is seeking answers to such a difficult subject. To me it is personal, as I remember my mum dying with excruciating pain from cancer, with only aspirin as her painkiller. If she was dying in another part of the world, the story could have been very different. The crucial issue here is not why some are better off while others suffer. It is simply why should innocent people suffer at all?

I don't believe that there are adequate answers to the reality of human suffering. Jesus did not come to give an answer to suffering either, but rather a meaning. His healing of the sick and those possessed by devils, only highlighted his power over death rather than being a solution to human suffering. One thing for sure, is that the suffering of the innocent only has meaning in Jesus' resurrection. But again this is still an inadequate explanation.

Sometimes there is no reason. Some suffering is sometimes random and circumstantial, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the one hand we can attribute the orderliness of the universe to God, but on the other hand we ought to emphasise that the world is imperfect and we remain human. God leaves us room to be human. We succumb to both the positive and the negative forces of nature. In the midst of all this, we are granted freewill to choose either to look out for each other or ignore each other. When we look out for each other, whether in prayer or in kind, we enhance the orderliness of the universe. God does not routinely intervene to save innocent people, but faith in God gives us the strength of character that we need to handle suffering: even of an innocent child.

Fr Arbo Lekule

