

Luke 23:32-43

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[0 : 00] I wonder what your memories are of that day ten years ago. Let me share one person's memories. I was unable to take my usual route because of the signal failure on the Northern Line. I've always hated circle line trains, but I remember rushing down the escalator at Moorgate just as one pulled in and thinking, what a result!

I jumped on the first carriage I got to. I opened my newspaper and was just reading about the Olympics thinking, I've got to get tickets for this. Just as the bomb went off. Those are the memories of Martine Wright, published last week in The Observer. Later in hospital, she had both her legs amputated as a result of that explosion. I'm sure we've all read or heard stories like that in the last few days.

Maybe we know friends who were personally affected by the events of that day. A friend of mine was one of the first ambulance drivers on the scene at King's Cross. We still weren't entirely sure what had happened.

It was a day of suffering that changed the lives of many people, wasn't it? And in such a sharp contrast, the previous day. The previous day was such a day of joy for the city. It was the day, the 6th of July, when London was awarded the 2012 Olympics.

[1 : 14] Yet so quickly joy turned to grief as those bombs hit. And when people suffer pain such as that, it raises so many questions, doesn't it? Martine Wright said that when she was in hospital, she thought, Why me?

Why am I one of the worst injured? Why have I lost both my legs above the knee? The why question was a big thing for me in the first year, she said. And as well as the why question, there's also the where question that people ask, isn't there?

Why did this happen and where is God in the midst of it? If God is supposed to be all-powerful and good, then where is he when tragedy strikes? It's not just the July 7th bombings that raise that for us, is it?

Just a couple of weeks ago, we had that massacre on the beach in Tunisia. Just in the last two weeks, we had a tragedy of the double suicide at Ealing Broadway.

And no doubt in our own lives, we all have personal experiences of hurt, suffering, injustice. So the question comes, doesn't it, if God is so good, if God is all-powerful as Christianity teaches, then where is God when it hurts?

[2 : 24] Why is there so much evil in the world? Of course, that is a deeply personal question, can be a deeply personal question. In a forum like this, it's hard to address it personally.

So we have to look a little bit at the philosophical side of that question, if you like. But it's in no means to denigrate the importance of that personal question. As I said earlier, I'd love to talk to you further, if you're willing, if you'd like to see that more.

But I want us to notice that this is only a question for Christianity. It's only a question for Christianity. No other religion will tell you that God is good and all-powerful. It's not a question for atheism.

For atheism, everything is just chance. So when cancer strikes or the bomb goes off, everything is just dancing to the tune of its DNA, to borrow a phrase from Richard Dawkins.

Neither is it a question for Hinduism, where everything that happens is just a result of karma. What goes around comes around. We get what we deserve. Nor is it a question for Buddhism, which essentially doesn't have a God.

[3 : 29] It believes that suffering is a kind of illusion generated by our desires. It's not really a problem for Islam in the same way either, where Allah's will is just by definition good and to be submitted to.

So it's only Christianity, with its insistence on a personal, powerful, loving God, that really has to face up to this question.

And for some people, events like 7-7 show that if there is a God, he doesn't care. If he did, surely he'd put an end to the pain. For others, events like 7-7 are proof that God is not powerful.

Or the idea of God, or God that he exists, may provide some comfort, but clearly has no power to stop evil things happening. And for others, pain and suffering just destroy any sort of belief in God. On Sunday night, the BBC had a drama called A Song for Jenny, which is adapted from a book by Julie Nicholson. Julie was a Church of England vicar in Bristol when her 24-year-old daughter Jenny was killed on the bomb on the Edgware Road train.

[4 : 38] In the TV programme, she says at one point, I can't believe in anything anymore. I can't believe in anything anymore. And certainly in real life, Julie Nicholson resigned her place as an Anglican clergyman.

She left her parish. She felt unable to forgive. And I'm sure we can all understand that. It must be hard to forgive someone who'd blown your daughter apart. Now this is a big question.

Big questions can't be answered simply in 15 minutes. But what I want to do is focus on one little event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, which I hope will give us a way of thinking about this question. Where is God when it hurts? There's this event which I just read, which is on the paper in front of you. This record is written for us by a guy called Luke. Luke, at the start of his account of Jesus' life, tells us he went back to eyewitnesses to write it, so that the reader could be sure of the certainty concerning the things he'd been taught.

And in the first 22 chapters of this book, Luke has produced plenty of evidence to back up Christianity's claim that Jesus is God on earth. that Jesus was God in human form.

[5 : 49] And three times at least by this stage, Jesus had told his disciples that he had come to go to Jerusalem to suffer, to die, and to rise again.

Now we reach the climax of that story. Jesus has been betrayed as predicted, been tried in a sham trial. The official verdict of the Romans was that he's done nothing to deserve death, but he's given to be killed anyway.

You see, the crowd, whipped up by the religious leaders, demand Jesus should be crucified.

Modern commentators would say that these are religious fundamentalists who whip up crowds to join their extremism.

Well, let's look at what happens to Jesus as we work through this story. Let me tell you three things about Jesus, first of all. The first one's obvious, isn't it? He suffers injustice himself.

Look at verse 32. Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. He suffered injustice. Ten years ago today, many people suffered a grave injustice, didn't they?

[6 : 56] In trying to get to work, their lives were destroyed, either completely in death or changed forever by the injuries and psychological scars.

But this Jesus, who'd been declared innocent, suffered injustice, killed with criminals. The second thing you've noticed, although the Bible doesn't make much of it, is that he suffered terrible pain.

Look at the next verse, verse 33. Second line down. When they came to the place called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals. Crucifixion was one of the worst forms of execution ever invented.

Under Roman law, Roman citizens couldn't be crucified. It was kept for the lowest of the low.

Escaped slaves and such like. Ultimately, what killed the victims in crucifixion was actually asphyxiation.

They would suffocate because every time they tried to breathe, they'd have to pull themselves up with the nails through their wrists, push down with the nails through their feet, and dislocate their shoulders to be able to breathe.

[8 : 02] Jesus suffered injustice. Jesus suffered terrible physical pain. Never mind the emotional and spiritual pain which he also suffered. The third thing to notice is look how Jesus responds.

Look at verse 34. Jesus said, Father, forgive them, that is the Roman soldiers, for they know not what they do. See, Jesus forgives those who nail him to the cross.

Forgiveness is absolutely central to what Jesus came to do. It's absolutely central to Christian teaching. It's one reason that Julie Nicholson felt she had to leave her place as an Anglican vicar. She didn't feel she could forgive.

And yet, history is littered with examples of Christians who, having experienced God's forgiveness themselves, with Christ's help, are able to follow Jesus' footsteps and forgive those who've hurt them.

We saw that just a few weeks ago, didn't we, with the shooting in Charleston. Many of the families forgave Dylan Roof, the alleged killer. For example, Martine Collier, whose 70-year-old mother, Ethel Lance, was shot dead by the killer, said to him in court over a satellite link, I forgive you.

[9 : 17] You took something very precious for me. I will never talk to her again. I will never hold her again. But I forgive you. An extraordinary act that is not humanly possible, is it?

And yet, this woman who experienced God's forgiveness offers that forgiveness to others, just as Jesus did on the cross. So, looking at what Jesus experienced, what can we say?

Can we say God doesn't care about human suffering? Surely, we can't say that. Jesus repeatedly said he'd come to suffer. He'd come to die.

Jesus suffered with us, suffered for us, as we'll see later. Can we say God doesn't understand our suffering? I don't think we can say that, can we?

If Jesus Christ really is God on earth, and he experienced suffering firsthand, firsthand. Not just as something he knew about because he knows everything, but something he experienced in his own flesh.

[10 : 23] Well, having looked at what happened to Jesus, let's look at how people react to Jesus. We see three different responses here. First, we get the religious leaders in verse 35.

In their pride, they scoff. People stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, he saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

See, they thought they knew everything. They thought they were in the right. They thought it was up to Jesus to demonstrate that he was God by doing something miraculous, getting himself off the cross. Little did they understand that Jesus stayed on the cross to save others, not himself.

Well, as the proud scoffers but secondly, we see the cynical criminal. Look at verse 39. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. It's deeply cynical, isn't it? Here's a man who presumably has ignored God all his life, brought up in Israel, probably taught the Jewish faith from birth, yet rejects God, gets into a life of crime, gets the punishment he deserves.

[11 : 39] And it's only at that point he says, well, come on, Jesus, if you're God, save me. It's deeply cynical. He wants Jesus to be good to him, but he doesn't want to take responsibility for his own actions.

It's like the cynic today who asks mockingly, where is God when it hurts? Where is God when I need him? Having ignored God studiously all his life. But there's a third response.

as well as the proud scoffers, as well as the cynical criminal. They've got the humble criminal. Look at verse 40. The other criminal rebukes him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you're under the same sentence of condemnation?

And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. It's an incredible thing, but in his pain, hanging on the cross, this criminal sees three things very clearly.

First of all, he sees his own guilt. We are receiving the reward of our deeds, he says. But secondly, he sees Jesus' innocence. Verse 41, This man has done nothing.

[12 : 51] But most amazingly, he sees through the circumstances and sees something of Jesus' true identity. Look at verse 32.

He sees Jesus is God's king. He said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Now it's here in that brief interaction between Jesus and the humble criminal that we get a glimpse into the heart of the Christian message and a glimpse into why Christians can keep believing in a good, powerful, personal God in a world where there is so much pain and so much evil.

Now why is that? Well, first of all, what is Jesus' kingdom? Jesus' kingdom is the world we all want to live in. Let me unpack that a bit.

The Bible begins by telling us that God created the world and that we human beings are made in God's image. That's why we can love others. That's why we have an inbuilt sense of justice and right and wrong.

It's why we can work and make great creative things. But instead of the perfect world God made, we now live in a world that is scarred and confused and marked by death, disease, terrorist attacks,

injustice, illness.

[14:10] And we feel things are not right, don't we? We feel things are not the way they should be. That's why we cry out why when bombs go off and loved ones are torn apart.

So we cry out why when the diagnosis comes through. We know something is wrong. We know deep down the world is not the way it is supposed to be.

So what went wrong? Why do we not have the perfect world God made? Well the Bible's answer is that what went wrong is us. We went wrong. As a race we turned against this good God who had given us all we needed.

He's the rightful ruler. He's the giver of life. And yet we rejected his rule and went our own way. We do that in all sorts of ways. We do it by ignoring God.

We do it by using God. We do it by following our own idea about what God is like. Now how do you feel when people use you or ignore you or just make up their own idea about who the real you is?

[15:16] We don't like it do we? And yet that's how we treat God. And in the process we diminish ourselves, we damage other people and we damage God's world. The just punishment for this, the just punishment from turning from the God who is the giver of life is death.

So what's the solution? Well God could destroy any one of us, all of us, whenever he wants. He loves the world he made, he loves the people he made.

And so when we hurt other people, he wants justice for those people. And that means we are in the firing line deserving punishment as well. See, God couldn't just ignore the damage we've done because he loves, because he's committed to what he made, to the world he made.

God has to punish, and yet God wants to show love. God is to send his own son, Jesus Christ, to live the perfect life we should have lived.

Jesus then died the death we should have died, as our substitute in our place, taking our punishment. And God raised him to life again. If you read all in the story, you'll see that's what happens next.

[16:30] On the third day, as he promised, Jesus rose from the dead. And that resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is God's king, and it guarantees that that kingdom is coming one day when Jesus comes back.

That kingdom will be physically established. And in Jesus' kingdom, there will be no more hurt, no more evil, no more fear, no more death, no more illness.

Isn't that the world we all want? A world where we're reconnected to the God who made us? Now how do I get there from what we've read here? Well look at verse 43.

Look what Jesus says. Jesus said to him, this humble criminal, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. The first installment, if you like, of that kingdom.

So this criminal knew he deserved death. He knew Jesus deserved to be king. He knew he had nothing to offer Jesus. But Jesus had everything to offer him. And so Jesus promised him paradise.

[17:37] paradise. Paradise does not come by strapping explosives to yourself and blowing yourself up. It comes through trusting in Jesus forgiveness, seeking Jesus forgiveness.

So can you see how this little exchange hints at how Christians can believe in a good God in a messed up world? God? Let me sum it up in three little statements.

We cannot say God doesn't understand our suffering. In Jesus, God the Son, God in human flesh, God has first-hand experience of pain and injustice.

Furthermore, God the Father gave up his own beloved Son, Jesus, to win people for himself. That must be some comfort for those who've lost children.

We cannot say God doesn't understand. We cannot say God doesn't care about our hurt and our injustice. The fact that Jesus came to suffer so that his kingdom, his perfect kingdom could come, shows us God does care.

[18:43] God has gone to great lengths. Let me put it like this. Jesus died so that God could put an end to hurt and suffering and evil without putting an end to me or you.

God will put an end to hurt and suffering without putting an end to us because Jesus died. We cannot say God doesn't understand, we cannot say he doesn't care, and we cannot say God is not powerful enough to deal with the hurt and the evil and suffering.

Jesus' resurrection shows us that he is. That promise today you will be with me in paradise is a little hint that God is powerful enough. And if you read on to the end of the Bible story, you'll see the very good ending that waits for everyone who trusts in Jesus as God's king and seeks Jesus'

forgiveness.

Here's how the story ends, Revelation 21 verse 4. It's in a renewed physical world that is better than we could ever dream of. God himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. Where is God when it hurts? In Christ God has demonstrated his love for a hurting, broken world.

[20 : 04] In Christ God invites us to a pain-free, fear-free, physical paradise. In Christ we can be forgiven and come home to the God who made us and find the comfort that is only available in him.

The question is, do we believe it? Let me pray for us. Let me pray for us.