

We are not so strong. And in the battle against societal seduction, we need all the help we can get.

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## **A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING**

**By Charles de Lacy**

One of the deepest challenges I have found in ministry is to respond constructively and creatively to suffering in the lives of those I meet both within and without the church. For I have found that suffering far from being occasional is a frequent human experience. I am sure you have found the same.

As I sit before the word processor, into my mind come many different individuals who have experienced suffering in different ways. Let me with their permission tell you a little bit about them. I think of a single man in his forties who has chronic schizophrenia and who wrestles with the darkness of a life that feels profoundly disjointed and insecure. From time to time he believes that God hates him and wants to damn him and in his distress, he blasphemes and curses in the loneliness of a bedsit.

Now my mind drifts to a family where the 38 year old father has an incurable and chronic heart disease which could result in his death in the near and uncertain future. He is unable to be active and his wife must be constantly there for him. For the children, two boys, there is the unbearable tension of wondering when Dad will die, as well as the frustration of having a dad who is present,

but who is too sick to assume his full role within the family unit. Mum feels pressurised because she is left to discipline and guide two lively and troubled boys, as well as seeking to come to terms with her own agoraphobia.

I think of others going through the deep pain of marital stress where partners have lost their sense of respect for one another and regard each other with suspicion, fear and anxiety. They are Christians and face the gnawing guilt that somehow life shouldn't be like this. They keep their hells private for fear that they will be censured by zealous fellow believers.

Then there is the single girl who finds herself at the age of twenty-one in the operating ward because she has a growth. Her mother has just died of cancer and her father died of cancer ten years ago. She is taking her first tentative steps towards the Lord and now this!

There is a mother bringing up a couple of children on her own. The father has gone and left behind him two children, disturbed because of his violent and unpredictable behaviour. The mother's own childhood was pain ridden and unstable and now she has to provide stability herself for two lively boys even though her own resources are so limited.

A father in his thirties comes to mind. He has been unemployed for two years and goes through the excitement of getting a new selling job only to find that it is not suitable for his skills. Within weeks he is back on the dole. Better that he hadn't had the job than go through this loop.

Or there is another father in his thirties, who has a lovely wife and three delightful daughters but who suffers from the ever increasing debilitation that goes with MS. He works at a health centre where they seek to support MS sufferers but no matter how much he wants to help, there are always those days when he cannot because the disease gets the better of him. What will he do when he cannot help at all?

There is also the widow grieving for her husband and living with an unexplained medical condition that causes debilitating nausea and sickness. The nights of sickness can be lonely and her husband is no longer there to share the concern.

Finally there is me, the pastor, feeling the pressure of the ministry with its various and apparently contradictory demands, many times feeling profoundly inadequate and stressed! At the same time with four children, two of whom are teenagers, home doesn't feel the most stable of places either!

Suffering, for ourselves, our churches and our world, is an ever present and inescapable reality which we cannot afford to ignore, for to do so will leave us feeling deskilled in painful pastoral situations and potentially crushed by an overwhelming sense of futility.

The secular world has taken its own models for interpreting and alleviating suffering. Social and psychological analysis and medical knowledge have often provided the raw material for helping individuals to come to understand the cause of their pain and where possible to find healing. In the psychological realm in particular these models provide us as clergy and ministers with useful tools for approaching complex pastoral situations. We learn of the different stages of grief and are given a helpful perspective to approach the bereaved when we meet them pastorally. We feel more confident because we have tools that help us understand and interpret what at first appears to defy order and coherence. We hear of the far-reaching effects of sexual abuse in the life of a child and we find with that knowledge we can make sense of some of the patterns of emotion and behaviour in those who from time to time disclose tortured childhoods to us. We feel less inadequate, more in control. And yet whilst we may and should find these secular tools helpful they are not enough.

As pastors we are not there simply to help an MS sufferer or single parent by listening and applying our insights and the counselling skills we have picked up on the way. We are also there to bring the comfort of God and a divine perspective into the situation in order that the person concerned may sense behind their suffering and pain a gracious and loving Father working out a good purpose in and with the suffering. This is a theological question which requires theological reflection, and which secular models by their nature are not competent to answer.

We therefore need to develop theological models which will provide a framework for interpreting suffering, models which enable us to begin in some very small way to see suffering from a divine perspective. We should recognise that this framework isn't there to

provide a more comfortable way of looking at life. It is not there to be the raw material for a philosophy of positive thinking. Heaven forbid! No, rather the framework, if reflective of biblical categories, will enable us to see in some pale way that God is at work in the most messy and twisted of lives, whether ours as pastors or those of members of our congregations or folk we meet outside the church.

For me a great stimulus to think in this kind of way was a book by Alister McGrath entitled *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.<sup>34</sup> It was in this exposition of Luther's *theologia crucis* that I at last understood that there was more to suffering in the people of God than meets the eye. McGrath notes that it was following the devastation of the First World War with all its appalling suffering that Luther's *theologia crucis* was taken with renewed seriousness by Continental theologians. McGrath writes, 'For the theologians of the liberal Protestant era, it has little if any significance... The shattering of liberal Protestant values and aspirations through the devastation and dereliction of the First World War, however, gave a new urgency and relevance to Luther's insights.'

A Second World War only added to the pressure to discover a theology that would adequately contextualise in suffering as can be seen from these comments of Jürgen Moltmann: 'Since I first studied theology, I have been concerned with the theology of the cross... No doubt this goes back to the period of my first concern with questions concerning Christian faith and theology in real life, as a prisoner behind barbed wire... Shattered and broken, the survivors of my generation were then returning from the camps and hospitals to the lecture room. A theology which did not speak of God in terms of the abandoned and crucified one would not have got through to us then.'

This is the heart of Luther's *theologia crucis*; our God is one who reveals himself in the shame and humility of the cross of Jesus Christ. This is where we find true knowledge of God. Luther states his theological principles in Theses 19 and 20 of the Heidelberg Disputation of April 1518:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they

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<sup>34</sup> Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's theological breakthrough* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 1981).

were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. Romans 1:20

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through the suffering and the cross.

Luther comments on Thesis 20 in this way: "The back and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Corinthians 1:25 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognised in suffering..."

The paradox is of course that God who makes himself visible to us through the cross at the same time is hidden from us for we do not naturally see the divine glory in the dark degradation of the crucified Christ. For Luther, God is hidden (*absconditus Deus*) but in his hiddenness he makes himself known. God is active in suffering, not simply passive. The dreadful sufferings of Christ, the bearing of that alien work of God - his judgment - lead to justification. As God works in the cross so he works in our lives. We experience spiritual assaults (*Anfechtung*) which come from God, but they are there to humble us in order that we might be justified in Christ. These assaults are God's alien work (*opus alienum*) through which God accomplishes his proper saving work (*opus proprium*).

McGrath helpfully comments: "Far from regarding suffering or evil as a nonsensical intrusion into the world (which Luther regards as the opinion of the 'theologian of glory'), the 'theologian of the cross' regards such suffering as his most precious treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves".

Through pain and self-despair we are brought to trust in God alone. We can see, as we reflect, that the God who was at work in a saving manner through the sufferings of Christ, has been furthering his work of salvation for us, through our suffering. For those in Christ, suffering evidences God's activity and power for their salvation and eternal glory.

If we grasp something of Luther's *theologia crucis* it will alter the way in which we approach suffering persons in the pastoral context.

Firstly it will alter our approach when we go to minister to those who suffer, whatever form that suffering may take. We shall not regard our job, in the words of Milton, 'to justify the ways of God to man!' We are not there to offer complex theological treatises to the grief-stricken - let us leave that to the theologians of glory! No, rather when we minister to the suffering we shall believe that God is the hidden and active one in their suffering, we shall enter into their situation with humility, believing that God has gone before us. We shall go believing that we are coming to holy ground. This will enable us to approach great need with sensitivity and trust in God.

Secondly because we believe that God has gone before us we shall accept that we are there to work alongside God. We shall see God as the chief character in this drama and ourselves as a 'bit-part' actor. Or to change the imagery we shall enter the theatre of a great surgeon as junior registrars there to assist as the surgeon directs. How frequently we can feel an inappropriate sense of responsibility to carry the burden of suffering which is reflective of our own misplaced sense of importance. When we feel subtle pressures of this kind we can become paradoxically insensitive and crass, unable to draw alongside the individual we are seeking to help because we feel that somehow it's all down to us - we may become anxious and fearful in ways that incapacitate us.

Thirdly we shall see ourselves as travellers with those who suffer, there to support them by bringing them the comfort of the God who is the crucified one. We live in an age when there is little sympathy within the church for the suffering that may be long term reality in the lives of many. Frequently the only response at a theological level is a model of a God who heals and when God does not move in healing power the church has nothing meaningful to say. Indeed the silence is positively embarrassing! Luther's theology of the cross will enable us to accept suffering on a long term and in some cases a lifetime basis. We shall see our call to help sustain the faith of those who suffer. We shall see the power of God in the fact that faith is sustained despite the odds.

In one situation, I sought to help a Christian being treated in a psychiatric clinic for depression. The person concerned was quite convinced that he had no faith, and that he was eternally damned. The pain was intense. Luther's theology enabled me to accept that

we were looking at a process that would take time and much support.

I felt unpressurised in the situation, content that God in his mercy would bring the person out of this great darkness which in due time he did. I am also convinced that spiritually much was accomplished in that person's life which remains known to God but hidden from us. Looking back I did nothing, God did all.

Fourthly Luther's theology will help us to make sense of our suffering as pastors and Christians. We who are cracked earthen vessels will see that our griefs and sorrows not only make us compassionate towards others who are suffering themselves but also somehow works into us a *theologia crucis* that is more than academic. Our sufferings coupled with right thinking will give depth and power to our ministry which would otherwise be lacking. It will certainly not be a power that will make headline news but it will be the kind of power which will make us effective servants of Christ to those who are grappling with God in the furnace of trial and pain.

Luther worked hard to develop his perspectives. We too will need to be prepared to do some hard work theologically if we are going to profit from his insights. We will be tempted to think that to read Luther and others like him will somehow be a waste of time. We may think that we would be better off reading some new book on dynamic psychotherapy feeling that it would be more relevant to our ministry. We must resist this temptation. Proper plundering of the Church's heritage in this area will bear rich fruits in the years ahead in our ministry and bring great blessing not only to those whom we seek to serve but also to ourselves for where we once thought God was absent we shall now discover that he is gloriously present.

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