

SUFFERING AND DEATH: QUESTION AND ANSWER

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THE PROBLEM of human suffering can be the greatest temptation of our faith and of our christian existence. How can God allow so much suffering? How can he look upon all the horror, injustice and ill-will that we experience? Why must his friends suffer just as his enemies do? Why does he not make manifest his almighty power? Why does he not help us when we feel the need for his help most keenly? Events take their course as if there were no God, as if our imploring prayer remained unheard. Gloom is not dissipated, the darkness of destiny is not dispelled, the helpless receive no lasting consolation. Often we have to look on helpless, while human beings, our friends and our neighbours, whom we love tenderly and for whom we pray in faith, are cast about on a sea of anguish and despair. What sort of God is it that permits all this and never intervenes? So the gnawing doubts multiply and undermine our certainty. They can be so strong that the whole of our faith totters, so that it seems we would be fools to go on believing. The victory of faith often consists in maintaining an 'even so' of fidelity in despair, an 'in spite of' in the most bitter experience.

What, then, is the meaning of pain and death? Who flung me into this painful world? Why was I compelled to live? Why did no one consult me about it? Why should I, who bear within myself an immortal spirit, why should I be tied to a body, to that which is transient, which is doomed to decay? And why should everything, in the end, be taken from me: my life, my friends, everything that I have built up and worked for with so much effort? Why must I go through illness and suffering, through death and through everything that goes with death, in order to reach immortality? Who answers these questions? It is Jesus Christ, who said of himself: 'I am the first and the last, the living one. I was dead, but now I live for all eternity. I hold in my hands the key to death and to life hereafter'. It is he who can help us to find an answer to all these torturing questions, and to win through from our darkness to his

light, so that from our despair we may pass over into his joy.

This word joy expresses the inner attitude with which a christian should approach every problem of his life, including therefore that of pain. Joy is the ultimate yardstick in christian experience. Depression – and we are thinking not so much of what happens on the surface but in the depths of our existence – is unchristian: it contradicts the spirit of the Lord. Reflection on the darker side of human life, on sickness, pain and death, ought to lead us to joy: otherwise it is not christian meditation. Joy happens when human existence stands entirely open to Christ: he, and only he, can bring light into our darkness. To seek christian joy cannot mean closing our eyes to human needs, or turning away our gaze from human darkness, but rather to experience in its depths the contradiction of pain, and to expose it to the light of the Lord.

Every reflection on pain and death must be shot through with this vital truth: after the resurrection of Christ the destiny of the world is already decided: we are moving heavenwards. Amidst all the realities of our provisional world, what is definitive and ultimate is already in process. What we seek cannot end in emptiness; nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. So John will say insistently: 'God is greater than our heart'. And Paul gives an answer to all our hopes which goes beyond even the carefully calculated dreams of humanity: 'When once all things are subject to Christ then will the son be with God, so that God may be all in all'. In such a world there is no reason for despair or cowardice. God wants to see joyous, renewed, useful souls, souls relieved of anxiety. The christian is to be a witness to joy in our joyless and pain-ridden world.

The ultimate questions of life, and certainly questions about sickness, pain and death are amongst these, must be answered from the basic insights of our faith, otherwise the answers will be superficial or simply false. Revelation gives us a basic answer to the why of suffering and death: 'it was not always so', and, 'it will not always be so'. Once mankind lived in a state of wholeness, incapable of suffering, in a state of immortality, in paradise. And mankind will once again, in the state of eternal beatitude, achieve this wholeness, in possession of knowledge, incapable of suffering, and will live immortally, in heaven. We come from paradise and we are going towards heaven. What stands in between, the whole painful life of humanity, is therefore simply a transition, an episode of unhappiness in a world which is made for happiness.

In the beginning, man – that is to say, man as he was originally

planned and made by God – was already whole, in possession of knowledge, incapable of suffering and death. He was living in a world that was ‘other’. How was his world ‘other’? It was certainly a very threatening, hard and pitiless world; for man in the beginning had not yet learned to master it. And yet this man lived in a world that was ‘other’.

What do we mean here by world? That which has two elements: the things and events which surround us, and an inner attitude, the state of man’s consciousness. ‘World’ is not a reality which is ready made. It ‘happens’ not only out of objective situations but also out of our subjective attitude to them. Today we experience this ‘world’ only in love and in friendship. A man who loves experiences the world that is ‘other’. He discovers new depths and new meanings in the world. That was how it was in the state which we call paradise. Paradise was not another world; it was a world experienced in another way. We find the central moment of paradise in the third chapter of Genesis: God walked with man in the cool of the evening; they were in intimate conversation; they walked together hand in hand. This means that man was ‘with God’; the Lord was close to him. Between man and his creator was an ‘experienced’ immediacy. God was a part of this man’s experience; everywhere he felt God to be near at hand. That was the meaning of paradise; it was the same world in which we live, and in some ways a more threatening world. Yet it was another world, because it was experienced by man in another way, experienced in the light of God. It follows that man in paradise was whole. He possessed, as the theologians say, the *donum integritatis*: that is to say, he was not inwardly divided, not torn between desire and the realization of desire. Of course he knew nostalgia. He too was not always able to fulfil his dreams. But, as he held the hand of God, he sensed fulfilment close to him. He knew, from his inward experience, that all nostalgia, all wishes and dreams, have their fulfilment. In this way man in paradise was whole: filled with desires, but sensing the fulfilment of his desires to be close at hand.

Paradise was also a state of complete knowledge – the *donum scientiae*. This does not mean that man knew a great deal quantitatively. The intellectual mastery of our modern technological world would have confused him. Yet qualitatively he knew much more than we do. The very little that he knew he received from the deepest ground, the very spring of all being. His world was transparent, ‘God-lucid’: it was a veil revealing God.

Paradise was also a state of incapacity for suffering – *donum impassibilitatis*. This does not mean that man in paradise was without experience of pain. Pain is a signal which brings to man's consciousness an experience of the elements of the world that are a threat to his well-being. A man without any experience of pain could not have survived in the world. But when a man constantly lives in immediate contact with God, when he is wholly directed to the other, to God, pain cannot get out of proportion in him, it cannot take possession of his whole being; in other words, it cannot become suffering. Today we see an image of this, in love. A lover can feel pain, be troubled in soul and physically threatened; but if he loves, – that is if he is accepted, with his whole being, in the beloved, then he bears his happiness with him, a happiness which no suffering can touch.

Finally, paradise was a state of immortality – *donum immortalitatis*. This does not mean that his biological condition was permanent, without change. Biological life presupposes self-development. But this development and refinement is such that it eventually reaches a state of fragility. And so, as life unfolds and is 'lived out', it prepares its own destruction: it moves towards death. But this death would have occurred in the state of lived immediacy with God, without separation or rending apart. Through the power of God which was in him, man would have passed immediately into the state of perfection, into the state of resurrection, and therefore been 'drawn over' into heaven. He would have experienced a dying, an agony, but not death, not the break-up of his own being. His lived immediacy to God would have produced in him an immediacy to heaven, to eternal life.

Such was human life as it was planned and created by God: not encapsulated in itself, but wholly drawn towards the holy, towards the experience of God. No matter how primitive, ignorant, menaced and liable to die this man might have been, he was perfect. Paradise was therefore a state (and whether it lasted a long time or only a moment is of no importance here) of tranquillity, of knowing, of unthreatened and fully lived being in a restless, opaque world given over to death. This life does not exist any more. Somewhere, sometime, this paradise was destroyed; and we were given over to inner conflicts, to ignorance, to pain and to death. Who brought about this state of affairs? Certainly not God. He never breaks off any friendship. In some way or other – we cannot say how and when – man told him: 'I will live with you no more'. This 'no more' destroyed what was most beautiful and most alive in this man – his

immediate relationship to God; and so it destroyed man himself. He could no longer experience God immediately; so that all his desires and dreams were empty; he gave himself over to ignorance; and thus pain grew in him and overflowed his whole being and became suffering; and thus death came out of dying.

The wonder is that God did not leave the matter there. He did not abandon man. He 'permitted', it is true, that the irruption of pain should no longer be halted in us. In his despair (it is hard to find another word) he took suffering upon himself and came down into our death. As man went away from him, he came nearer to man. The whole history of humanity consists in the approach of God to us, ever nearer and nearer, and in God's gift of a new immediacy with himself: he himself became man in order to bring back the whole of man. He took upon himself fragile being, our threatened state, our creaturely ignorance, our pain and our death. Since man no longer wished to be with God, God became man, so that he could be with man.

We do not know why he did this. Love does not have to provide reasons; it gives itself without question. That is why it is love; and God is love. It is not simply that he loves: rather his whole being consists in love. He loves and he does nothing else but love. To love and to be, in him, are one. He would cease to be (which is an impossible, indeed a meaningless supposition) if he no longer loved. By becoming man in Christ, God brought to completion the second act of creation. He makes heaven possible for us again. So creation is not yet perfected. It is still in process of being perfected. It will end only when man abandons himself again to the immediacy of God, when he enters once again paradise, which from now on is called heaven.

To be able to understand our life, we must know, in the sense of inwardly experiencing, and also make credible for others, that human life is directed to heaven. The world will be perfected only when man enters heaven. We are not yet alive in the proper sense of the word. Our life is only beginning, a becoming, a growing towards heaven. Illness, suffering and death belong to this state of transition. We know today that the cosmos is the product of an evolution that has been going on for millions of years. It evolved from its original state towards life; and life is perfected as man's mind is formed, and as this mind takes possession of itself in its recognition of God and in its giving of itself to him in love. Union with God draws the whole cosmos towards eternal fulfilment. This

fulfilment is, in the end, a definitive, God-transparent cosmos: heaven. God created the world by lending it the power to rise towards him throughout its long development over thousands of years. The world is pointing to heaven. The end is the true beginning. According to the original plan of creation, the world should have passed over from paradise to heaven without any destruction, suffering or death. As things are now, because Christ became man and conquered death, and opened the way to heaven once more, the world moves infallibly and indubitably towards heaven.

But what is heaven? We do not know precisely. In the bible this radical fulfilment is referred to as 'the new heaven and the new earth'. John describes this new world in his apocalypse, his 'secret revelation'. He speaks of oceans of glass, of streets made of gold and crystal, of doors fashioned of rare pearls, of walls built of glowing precious stones. The dominant motif in this description is the sense of power, of the humanly unattainable. Paul, too, stresses this 'otherness' of heaven: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him'. And yet heaven is already very close to us. With the resurrection and ascension of Christ, heaven has already broken in upon our world. The powers of the world to come have already taken possession of us. Christianity considers the resurrection of Christ not simply as the private destiny of our Lord, but at the same time as the first sign that everything in our world has already been transformed radically, decisively, truly. The Easter event is not an isolated and limited fact in the history of salvation, but the sacred destiny of the whole world. Through his resurrection, Christ has spoken his effective and creative word upon the whole universe. It has already begun: 'See, I make all things new'. Though heaven is far from us, it is also close to us, radically related to us. The christian lives in this tension. He is already in some sense in heaven, but in a heaven which is not yet constituted fully. In a similar way, the disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced the reality of the risen Lord. Jesus joined the two disciples who had left the brethren gathered in the upper room. For a long time he went along with them and spoke with them. But they did not recognize him. The Lord always appeared in this way after his resurrection, discreetly, as a hungry man, as a gardener, as a traveller, as a man on the shore of the lake. It is in this way that heaven is close to us. It appears unobtrusively; we catch its reflection, as in a mirror.

Christ promised to everyone a share in his own happiness in

heaven. He promised what people most needed: eternal water to the samaritan woman, bread of eternal life to the people of Capharnaum, an abundant catch to the fishermen, to the shepherds, large flocks and pastures ever green, precious pearls to merchants; and to all of us an eternal banquet, a constant marriage celebration – which is a symbol of unending happiness in ‘possession’ of the person we most cherish in our life.

It follows that heaven is life lived intensively and completely. Not a world of ideas, grandiose but bloodless and dehydrated: but rather the fulness, the elevation of our sensible perceptions to eternity, in which they can grasp God as a gift. In heaven the ineffable gift for which the Church prays will come to pass: *accende lumen sensibus*, as we sing in the *Veni Creator*. The light of God will overflow in all our senses. What the mystics and all deeply religious men have experienced in innumerable mirrorings will come to pass: God will be seen, heard, tasted and enjoyed by us. Thus in heaven everything that is intellectual will be in the realm of the sensible, and everything that is sensible will be in the realm of the intellectual – including God himself. And man will indwell in the whole of reality, in a world made whole.

Heaven, then, is the definitive, ensconced, indestructible closeness of God, a participation in God. Our being can never full grasp or plumb the infinite depths of God’s being. Hence, even this fulfilment is constantly a new beginning, a movement towards still greater fulfilment. Heaven must be understood essentially as a boundless dynamism. The fulfilment itself will so ‘expand’ our souls, that in the next moment they can be filled still more by the being of God. We are therefore eternal seekers after God. God remains ever greater than our limited being. A God that we had finally ‘got hold of’ would be no God. Throughout our earthly life we seek God in order to find him. In eternal blessedness, even after we have found him, we continue to seek him. Here, he is hidden, so that man may seek after him, in order to find him. And he is incommensurable, so that we have to seek him even after we have found him. Eternity, then, will be a constant moving towards God. In heaven everything static is turned into a boundless, progressive, advancing movement towards God. Fulfillment is eternal transformation, a state of ceaseless and uninterrupted life.

Pain, sickness and death must be considered in this context. These are the real perspectives of human life. We are not forever given over to suffering. Our inner distress, our inner dissolution do not

last forever. We are moving towards heaven. The suffering and need which afflict us here are provisional: in the deepest and last analysis unimportant. And yet it is still our task to protect those whom we love (and we have the duty to love as many men as possible) from all that depresses them and makes them suffer: that is, to make easier for them the way to their final happiness, to heaven.

We are all committed to oppose suffering. That is the first demand of the christian's love of his neighbour. As long as it is possible, the christian will offer every consolation; as long as it is possible, we must fight with God against evil. Our first task is service of the suffering brethren, for christian existence is built upon our neighbour. As a christian I have to help my abandoned and suffering brothers, and in that I am a christian. A christianity which is not concerned with the urgent task of love of the poor and the abandoned is empty chatter. The didactic point of the cure of the paralytic at the pool of Bethsaida, is that he had nobody to help him.¹

It is the most terrible experience of a human life when a person has to say: 'I have nobody'. As long as there is anyone in my environment, among the people who are accessible to me, who has to say 'I have nobody', then I am no christian. My eternal happiness depends on understanding Jesus' parable of the judgment: 'Come you blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom which is prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me to eat'.² This is not symbolic language. It must be understood in all its hard truth. It is true that spiritual need, inner imprisonment and hunger of soul, are also hard realities. Somebody who has never once in his life given something to eat to someone who is hungry, or drink to someone who is thirsty, or never harboured a stranger, clothed someone who was naked, visited the sick, or consoled a prisoner, will not come into heaven, and so is not inwardly a christian; he has understood nothing of christianity. He has missed its reality. A man becomes a christian not first of all because he finds ecstasy in his prayer, not because he knows a great deal about laws and prescriptions, but through the selfless service of his abandoned brethren in everyday life: of those who are saying: 'I have nobody'. Whoever goes out and helps a poor man, or even simply a man who feels abandoned, will one day hear the word of Christ: 'You are blessed. I have prepared for you a kingdom from the beginning of the world. You have been a christian'.

¹ Jn 5, 1-9.

² Mt 25, 35.

But who is my neighbour? When Christ was asked this question he replied, not by any abstract working out of the concept of neighbour, but by telling the story of the good samaritan. The essential point of this story is that my neighbour is the one who has only me to help him. The whole attitude of the christian is summed up in that: do what no one else will do in your place; be ready; develop an openness of heart; be open to the sufferings of others. If you have this attitude, then one day you will meet the man who has nobody, apart from you; and then you must take him upon yourself; stay with him, not pass by, tend him. It is almost impossible to bring out in a modern language all the shades of meaning in the story of the good samaritan. This is especially true of the point which concerns us here. In the first two cases, those of the priest and the Levite, the text says: 'he saw him and passed by'. According to the greek text it should rather be: 'he saw him, halted for a moment without knowing what to do, and then went on'. Christian life concerns itself especially with this moment of hesitation. I have to develop in myself an inner readiness to overcome this moment of hesitation, when specious reasons occur spontaneously, to let me off lightly. There is also the fear: 'if you bend down over this man, you will have to share in his suffering; but that will be very wearisome. It is better to pass by'. Our eternal destiny can be decided in this decision to 'pass by'.

It is at this point, of course, that we can begin to penetrate the invincible mystery of suffering, as we come more closely to conform ourselves with the compassionate love of the Christ who fights evil with all his strength. In sharing his life, I share this struggle: as a christian I may not give up the struggle before I have tried every possibility. Otherwise, the christian religion would indeed be an opium for the people: it would collapse under the weight of the enormous problem of suffering. It is one of the greatest scandals in the history of christendom that repeatedly christian love of the neighbour was not strong enough to cry out against exploitation – the situation in which men were shackled in poverty and misery by other men.

God calls us to help him in the fight against evil. He has not spirited away pain and suffering from our lives. The christian suffers, is hungry, struggles, like all other men. But hunger, suffering, struggle and death for him should have another sense. They should give him a chance to pass through his suffering to God, through the darkness into light.

To bear pain and illness patiently belongs to the genuinely

christian task of transforming darkness into light. Through the cross came the decisive choice for mankind. Through the suffering Christ endured there, the world received its spiritual transformation. If we want to transform the world into heaven, then we must take upon ourselves the suffering, the need and the care of men. The christian vocation is to suffer; and, at the same time, to be convinced that we are moving toward eternal happiness. In this way the life of the christian is a life of joy; and we have an answer to our most desperate need. Our bodily illness, our creaturely suffering, do not represent for us a threat so much as a task. Physical pain borne in a christian way diminishes the amount of suffering in our world. When we take the suffering upon ourselves, we save others from disaster. We bring heaven nearer and we begin to transform our lost paradise.

The same principle is to be applied to interior suffering as to physical pain: we are called to take human need upon ourselves, so that it gradually diminishes and disappears, until our world is transformed into heaven. This is the pattern Christ set in healing the man who was deaf and dumb.¹ Having tended to his bodily needs, he showed him a way out of spiritual suffering. He said to him: 'Be opened'. This is the first and fundamental answer of Christ to our spiritual need: 'Break out of the narrow circle of your self-isolation and your egoism and begin to say something good to your fellow men. It does not matter how clumsily or inadequately you do it; if you would be a man, live outside yourself and begin to listen to others. This means to be with them without counting the cost, to be there for them: what you suffer from most of all is that you are a stranger in the world of your fellow men. Open yourself. You will not lose anything. You will begin to be and only begin to be as you open yourselves for others, as you lose yourself for others; free yourself from yourself'. This is the essential answer of Christ to our human suffering. We suffer from the fact that we are not fulfilled. Christ says to us: 'The other is your fulfilment, go towards him, open yourself'.

Again, the healing of the ten lepers² was for Christ an occasion to provide us with a wonderful help for our spiritual needs. He says to us: If you want to be happy, be grateful. Do not take for granted any of the gifts of life – above all, life itself. The person who can say 'Thank you' confesses his own littleness, admits that

¹ Mk 7, 32-7.

² Lk 17, 12-17.

he receives his true reality as a gift. Only in this way can a man be truly saved: saved from himself, no longer locked up in his own ego. So God cries out to us: 'Cease to be in love with yourself. Let yourself go. Confess that you are nothing, that the little that you are you have received as a gift'.

Then there was the sign in the city of Naim.¹ Our Lord released a mother from her despair. He gave back to her all that she had lost. When we think that our life has been of no use to anyone, wasted on trivialities and frivolities, all our longings unfulfilled, Christ says to us: 'Have no fear, I will pay it all back to you. There is no dream and no desire which remains unfulfilled. You have lost nothing, least of all what you have renounced. Go forward calmly in self-forgetfulness. Lose all for others. Even if you have lost all, you will receive all back again from me'. So Christ draws us out of our spiritual narrowness and out of our obsessions and sense of failure. This is salvation: salvation from ourselves, from our own suffering.

In the end human pain enters so deeply into our being that it becomes the power of separation and of death. One's whole being collapses. In death man experiences a radical powerlessness and destruction. Is there an answer even here? 'Yes', Christ says to us: 'I possess the key of death'. It is only in the moment of death that a man can finally lay aside the otherness of his own being and become sufficiently master of himself to encounter Christ completely, with every fibre of his being. It is in this confrontation that he is able to make the truly real decision.

According to this hypothesis,² in the moment of death, every man is given the possibility of deciding for or against Christ, with complete freedom. Notice that we say 'in the moment' of death. We are not speaking of the moments immediately preceding death or of after death; but of the precise moment when the soul abandons the body. Then it awakens to its full spirituality, and understands all that created spirit can grasp. It sees its whole life summed up in a single whole, and discovers God calling and leading. It is impossible in this moment to ignore Christ. Man must decide once and for all – for all eternity, which will be nothing more than a development of what happens in this moment. Here he is faced by all he has sought for, grasped at, longed for. And through it all

¹ Lk 7, 11–15.

² Fr Boros has developed it fully in his *Moment of Truth* (London, 1965). Ed.

there gleams the light of the risen Christ. He is no longer confused by his environment, all that in his world or in his past that gave him a distorted image of God. He is able to make a really true judgment, and decide for total rejection or total embrace of Christ.

The objection to this hypothesis – that if it is true, why bother to live in this world according to Christ's pattern – is a specious one. Only I can provide myself with the certainty of making the right decision in this truly crucial moment. I alone am the measure of the sincerity of my desire to be converted to Christ. So it follows that the decision I would wish to make in the future I must begin to make now, with all that is in me. Every postponement of it will be a decision against truth and myself. Nothing can guarantee, except my own responses now, that I will transform everything in the moment of death. If we understand this, we begin to penetrate Christ's constant advice: 'Be sober and watch'. So many of us during our earthly existence wander at a distance from the truth. So many of us pass God by, dominated by people, things and events, by our own desires and dreams. All these things hold a man, scarcely leaving space for God in his thoughts. To enter heaven, men must have the possibility of standing before God and deciding for him. Before this can happen, all that a man was and had, all that he has made and clung to, that is not God-like, must be taken away. All the masks must come off, all the roles he has played, before self and the world alike, must cease. Here is the moment of decision, when he is liberated from all that prevented him from seeing God face-to-face. It is in this moment that he stands at the centre of the cosmos, before the glorified Christ. On his brow the sun gleams, his eyes are of fire; his face sparkles more than beaten gold and his hands hold the stars. Christ took upon himself the agony, the dying and the death, so that every man who has to pass along the road of death might encounter him; so that every man, at least in death, could make a free and definitive decision in his regard.

Thus Christ made us capable once again of recovering the nearness of God and of entering into endless happiness, the name of which is heaven, the real beginning of all things.