THEODICY: SUFFERING AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

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Category: Theology

Peter Kirk has tagged me with a rather interesting meme which asks rather more difficult and meaningful questions than the normal 'what is you favourite ice-cream?' thing that goes the rounds. There are four questions and I might get round to answering all of them.

> *1. if the nature of god is omnipotent, benevolent, and anthropomorphic (that god is a person, who sees suffering as wrong, and can change all of it), why does god not act to relieve all suffering, or at least the greatest amount of suffering for the greatest amount of people the greatest amount of time?*
> *2. if you were god, and you were omnipotent and benevolent, how would you respond to suffering?*
> *3. if this is not the nature of god, what is the nature of god, that allows suffering in the world?*
> *4. if these are the wrong questions to ask, what are the right ones?*

Let me take number two first because it's the easiest. If I were god, I'd mess everything up. No doubt my motivations would be good, but lacking wisdom and omniscience, I'd never be able to see all the consequences of my actions. Being good and powerful is not enough. Introducing rabbits to Australia would be nothing alongside the well intentioned disaster I could cause.

The problem with the other questions is that they can be answered in two ways.

There is the intellectual, philosophical question of why God allows suffering which deserves an intellectual and philosophical answer. My answer to this would be more or less a mixture of Peter's answer (God allows suffering so as not to restrain human free will), Jim West's answer (people cause suffering, not God, so don't blame him) and God's answer to Job (do you really think that you are capable of understanding why I do what I do?).Â The problem with all of these answers is that they do not satisfy, which is why theologians and philosophers have debated the subject for centuries and still keep on at it. They've even invented a cool name: theodicy for the question.

More important to me is the second way in which this question is asked. The deep philosophical question can actually hide a heartfelt cry of *"I'm hurting so much, why doesn't God stop it?"*. The pastoral question of why God allows me or my loved ones to suffer is much more urgent than the dry, objective stuff that some theologians turn out.Â Dave Burke, writing on this subject says the following:

> *Of all the people he met who were suffering terrible pain he never offered a theoretical explanation to any of them. He never once gave any of them a lecture on philosophy or the theory of suffering. Instead he told them to trust God, whatever the circumstances, to hang on to the one who could help them.*

And to me, Jesus is the answer to the heart cry of 'why does it hurt so much?'. You see, I don't know

why God allows suffering - I can give answers, but they won't satisfy. But I do know that God cares deeply and more than that, I know that he suffers with us. Jesus Christ understands our suffering as only a fellow sufferer can. He didn't remain in heaven, watching human suffering from a distance, he came down here to the earth and got involved with human life at its very worst and through his suffering he brought the promise of peace and reconciliation for the whole of creation.

Why does God allow suffering? I dunno, but I do know that when people suffer, he cares and he feels their suffering and that he alone can bring healing and peace to a broken world.

This meme started here and I pass it on to Phil and Greg.