Theological Reflections towards Developing More Adequate Pastoral Support Strategies in Cases of Tragic Bereavement.

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Tragic Bereavement

This paper focuses upon some theological reflections that underpinned a project entitled *Developing More Adequate Pastoral Support Strategies in Cases of Tragic Bereavement*. The project was the outcome of sustained reflection during what turned out to be a fairly intense period of ministry in a parish in the north east of Scotland. Having spent some twenty-six years lecturing trainee teachers in Religious and Moral Education, I opted for early retirement in 1994 with a view to returning to the parish ministry in which I had briefly served during the 1960s. To help me prepare for the return to parish work, I undertook a number of locums, three in all, and eventually secured a parish of my own. My job as a lecturer found me 'fully stretched' (Lord Reith). It was both a demanding and a rewarding job. However, as I was soon to discover, the one single, marked difference between the life-style of lecturer and that of parish minister was for me the sheer emotional demand that was to be laid on me as minister. A high number of suicides and/or early deaths took place within the first thirty months of my ministry, some thirteen in all, eight of them in their twenties and drug-related. Having direct contact with families who survived such tragic bereavement became a strong feature of my ministry. Several other forms of tragic bereavement were also to occur.

The Doctor of Ministry Reformed Theology programme required participants to select a final topic for study relevant to one's own ministry and situation. Given the nature of my experience at that time, it seemed as if my topic chose me rather than the other way round. The status and role of traditional and recent theodicies within a pastoral

context (God and Suffering); liturgical issues, including the doctrine of God and Universalism in funeral rites (God and Funeral Rites); and an understanding of the nature of trauma and its longer-term pastoral implications (God and Healing) were all explored in considerable detail. Initial discussion focused on the problem of suffering and belief in a God of love. Three case studies (several more would have been possible) involving tragic bereavement were presented. One case study involved a suicide by drowning with no recovered body to grieve over (Nobody Cares); another dealt with pre-natal bereavement of embryo twins at 20 weeks (The Little Ones); and the third, a neo-natal death of a seven day old baby baptised by me when two days old (Baptism in Tears). Short-term support of funeral services was considered and provided in detailed appendices, along with the establishment and development of longer-term support strategies of a Pastoral team, a Pastoral Library including 'bibliotherapy' methods of support, and Pastoral Guidelines for would-be pastors. The Case Study method of approach found me especially indebted to those dear friends who allowed me to write of their painful and traumatic experiences. The project was written in the conviction that while healing hurts there can be life after trauma.

Practical Theology!

Arguably, there is no better test of a minister's theology than the pastoral demand placed on her or him in the course of serving in the parish. The sheer emotional demand in fulfilling pastoral duties can be thoroughly exhausting. Exposure to the grief of others is no routine matter. The pastor absorbs the grief, no matter what professional defences are erected. The grief becomes part of the pastor's being and triggers off those deep and searching questions that require some sort of adequate response not simply from the parishioner but from the pastor. The pastor's own needs become exposed. The sheer number of tragic events in a relatively short space of time raises awareness of the fragility and unevenness of life. For the pastor they present the problem of how to cope adequately in the face of such perplexing circumstances. Nor is the process one of simply applying neat theological theory to events as they occur. There are ebbs and flows of experience where insights

and responses hopefully develop along the way. On a basis of trial and error, spontaneous actions are taken that are aimed at addressing specific needs. Where, with hindsight, they have appeared appropriate, they then may become part of the on-going process of building up and creating more long-term, adequate support strategies. But they do not occur in a neat, systematic way. They can be quite haphazard. As for the family survivors, the problem of how to 'pick up the pieces' and find their way back to some kind of normality in their living is paramount.

For there to be any hope of creating more adequate pastoral support strategies in cases of tragic bereavement, there has to be an underpinning of adequate theological reflection. This paper confines itself to some aspects of such reflection.

God and Suffering

The classical question 'Why does a God of Love permit evil and suffering?' is not one that is easily answered when experiencing personal tragedy. Traditional theodicies have attempted to provide various answers to this question, as have more recent, contemporary ones. Daniel Migliore, in *Faith seeking Understanding*[1], explores the various attempts that have been made to resolve the problem of what he calls 'The Providence of God and the Mystery of Evil.'[2] For the pastor the crucial question is to what extent do these theodicies help to resolve the dilemma of a God of Love versus the problem of evil?

Among the several theodicies Migliore considers is what he terms a Protest theodicy. In a television play entitled The Gift, the actress Amanda Burton is cast in the role of a relatively young mother who is dying of cancer. She has a young daughter and a good husband. Husband and wife are seen to argue intensely at times under the strain of her impending death. In one exchange she declares 'God is a bastard!' Migliore's Protest theodicy seems to go a long way towards agreeing with the proposition that 'God is a bastard'. Protest theodicy is associated with the name of John Roth. The significant feature of it is that, while assuming with the Bible a very strong view of the sovereignty

of God, it is not afraid to question the total goodness of God. This is highly unusual, not to say unique, at least among theodicies. It is less so within the pages of the Bible as can be seen in the Book of Psalms or Job or most significantly of all in Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross. In Protest theodicy, the Biblical God of Love is put on trial. The only way to be for God is by being against God. This theodicy is courageously honest and flies in the face of centuries of conformity to the concept of God's total goodness. In one such trial the rabbis concluded that God was indeed 'Guilty' for the horrors of the Holocaust and then they went to say their prayers! Subscribers to this theodicy seek to remain faithful to God even when he appears to have been less than faithful to them.

From the pastoral point of view, the Protest theodicy is highly relevant. Too often the injured, bereaved person struggles with a sense of guilt for daring to question God's love. But the anger is there just the same and although it is sometimes, curiously enough, directed at the deceased, especially in cases of suicide, it can also be directed at God. Such feelings need to be externalised and if all the various traditional theodicies contain an element of truth, as has been suggested, it is important to let the element of truth of this particular recent theodicy be more freely expressed.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Lament for a Son,*[3] provides us with a very moving account of his struggle to come to terms with the loss of his eldest son, Eric, killed at the age of 25 years, in a climbing accident. The book represents the out-pouring of a father's grief at the loss of his talented, energetic, life-affirming, son. 'He was cut down at the peak of vitality and promise.'[4] This is not a book for those looking for easy answers to the question why God allows suffering in the world. Wolterstorff is in no mood to peddle glib or pious answers.[5] Instead, he shares his feelings openly and honestly, protesting vehemently that such a thing should have happened, and wrestling agonisingly with the meaning and point of it all. On the other hand, this is a book for those who would sit beside him on his 'mourning bench', and share in his sufferings, and perhaps in the process, deepen their insight into the nature of life in all its sadness and joy. Potentially, it would be a

great help to people deeply wounded by life, but, at the same time, it is important to realise, it does not make easy reading.

Wolterstorff, significantly a Professor of Philosophical Theology, considers some of the explanations that people give for such tragic events and honestly admits:

> I cannot fit it all together by saying 'God did it' but neither can I do so by saying 'There was nothing God could do about it'. I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death.

Then, with an ironic turn of phrase when we remember how his son died, he says:

> To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing…I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. …To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess…I am not angry but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.[6]

Wolterstorff also makes it clear he doesn't want his wound to heal. He says – 'I shall try to keep the wound from healing, in recognition of our living still in the old order of things.'[7] And on reflecting upon the Risen Christ, he writes this:

> 'Put your hand into my wounds', said the risen Jesus to Thomas, 'and you will know who I am'. The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him

> – visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds. To believe in Christ's rising and death's dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love…so I shall struggle to live the reality of Christ's rising and death's dying. In my living, my son's dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand in.[8]

Probably, deep down, most of us long to be healed of our wounds. But Wolterstorff helps us to see healing wounds. Healing hurts. There is pain in the healing process. But equally, where we rise up, acknowledging and bearing our wounds, then our wounds can begin to heal. These are powerfully, disturbing reflections of a man struggling to come to terms with so great a loss. Wolterstorff's response to his son's tragic bereavement is one of strongest protest, but ultimately, it is a believing protest. At one point he is able to say - 'Through our tears we see the tears of God.' And again 'God does not explain our suffering he shares in it.'[9] But it's a believing protest that pushes faith to its limit. As he ponders 'how it will all go when God raises him (Eric) and the rest of us from the dead', Wolterstorff concludes:

> I wonder if it's all true? I wonder if he's really going to do it? Will I hear Eric say someday, *really* now I mean: 'Hey, Dad, I'm back'?
> 'But remember, I made all this, and raised my Son from the dead, so….'
> OK. So goodbye Eric, goodbye, goodbye, until we see.[10]

Many years have past since Wolterstorff lost his son. In the Preface to his book he tells us he is often asked whether his grief remains as intense as when he first wrote the book. His answer is No. 'The wound is no longer raw. But it has not disappeared. That is as it should be. If he (his son) was worth loving, he is worth grieving over'.[11]

Wobbly stones

In the pastoral situation theodicies are not so much encountered as discrete entities with an evident concern for internal coherence, but as a tentative, not to say confused, grasp of them all. In varying degrees and with only limited appreciation of any one of them, *they* provide a kind of safety net where experience has toppled the victim from the tightrope of God's almighty power versus human freedom. We may not wish to be puppets. Status as free persons appeals to us. But could an omnipotent God not have prevented this nasty experience happening? To change the analogy, in the pastoral situation of traumatic bereavement the various theodicies, or fragments of them, appear as wobbly stepping stones insecurely placed in the raging torrent. The distressed souls attempt to leap from one to the other in the sometimes vain attempt to cross from one bank of experience to its other side. The attempt includes using the less agreeable traditional ones of divine punishment or chastisement. Many see their suffering as a form of divine judgement upon themselves, despite the witness of Jesus to the contrary. Then they hold to God's goodness and consider he must limit his powers for his own purposes including the respecting of human freedom (cf. Process theodicy). Traumatic hurt does not always issue in God being accused. Instead the anger is directed at human causes such as the failure of doctors to diagnose correctly. At other times, the notion that hard experiences have been sent to try them emerges as their uppermost thought (cf. divine pedagogy and person-making theodicies). The injured souls wrestle, like Jacob, with a flurry not to say a blizzard of conflicting emotions - and try desperately to make sense of why such tragedies have occurred. Anger, guilt, depression, confusion, protest, resignation, numbness, stigma, self-doubt are all part of the scene. Only much later does re-orientation emerge, and sometimes not at all.

The theodicy debate will continue to run. Is protest just a form of human pride? Is humble submission the only alternative to the hand that life or God deals you? To suggest so to those in the midst of pain may be to increase their burden. There is need for a high degree of sensitivity when considering such issues, especially so where traumatic events like

suicide disrupt a family's life. In most cases survivors are not really asking for definitive theological pronouncements on suicide. They simply want assurances that the person they knew is not being punished and is at peace. What they look for in pastors is someone who can talk with them in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner.

Walking the Tightrope

The trouble with theodicies is that they appear to be tied to prior beliefs which then need to be seen to be consistent with reality. If God is believed to be Sovereign, Almighty and Loving, then somehow the facts of experience need to be made to fit into the declared beliefs! This is no easy task. Neither, is it legitimate. But if the source of the Christian faith is tied to the Biblical witness it may be inevitable that a tightrope has to be walked. Migliore says of Calvin,

> Like other classical theologians of divine providence, Calvin walks a tightrope between ascribing everything to God at the expense of the freedom and responsibility of creatures and compromising omnipotence of God by allowing some autonomy to creaturely activity.[12]

In fact, when it comes to the question of suffering Calvin is fairly uncompromising. For any enduring the experience of pain, his views may provide cold comfort. He, however, would argue that he is offering them 'great comfort'. For Calvin, the disciple of Christ 'must bear his own cross' *:*

> For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil. It is the heavenly Father's will thus to exercise them so as to put his own children to a definite test. Beginning with Christ, his first-born, he follows this plan with all his children.[13]

If Christ was not exempt from sufferings then why should we be? We have to learn from his example of patience. Paul teaches that it is God's will that all his children be conformed to Christ.

> Hence also in harsh and difficult conditions, regarded as adverse and evil, a great comfort comes to us: we share in Christ's sufferings in order that as he has passed from a labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like manner be led through various tribulations to the same glory (Acts 14:22). So Paul himself elsewhere states: when we come to know the sharing of his sufferings, we at the same time grasp the power of his resurrection; ready to share his glorious resurrection. (Phil. 3: 10-11).[14]

In Calvin's view, 'we must pass our lives under a continual cross'. Our problem lies in the fact that we have a 'stupid and empty confidence in the flesh' which leads us into insolent pride against God. Such arrogance is restrained by God through life's trying experiences.

> Therefore, he afflicts us either with disgrace or poverty, or bereavement, or disease, or other calamities. Utterly unequal to bearing these, in so far as they touch us, we soon succumb to them. Thus humbled, we learn to call upon his power, which alone makes us stand fast under the weight of afflictions.[15]

It appears 'man's extremity is God's opportunity' and our sufferings are, indeed, 'the things that are sent to try us'! (Vox populi). The key attitude required in the face of suffering is that of humility. However, Calvin recognises that is no easy attitude for people to adopt. Even 'the most holy persons' who rely upon God's grace 'are too sure of their own fortitude and constancy unless by testing of the cross he bring them into a deeper knowledge of himself'. Calvin's views may seem to lack feeling for people enduring a painful experience, but he expresses them with the conviction of one who believes that where confidence in the flesh is surrendered, there will be available to them 'the presence of a divine power in which they have protection enough and to spare'.

For Calvin, as indeed for Augustine before him, there is a firm belief that God is in control and that evil is under his control. The threefold qualities of humility in the face of adversity, gratitude for the good times, and liberating trust in God's providence are commended by them to us.

In what Migliore terms our quest for coherence it is better to recognise the limits of our knowledge and not to claim more than we know. We may have faith in God in Christ but our knowledge of God is not exhaustive. With Paul, we see 'through a glass darkly' or 'dimly' or 'only puzzling reflections in a mirror'. We might, therefore, in the final analysis, be tempted to agree with Migliore when he says:

> This fact comes home to us nowhere more forcefully than when we affirm the providence of God in the face of the reality of radical evil in the world. In relation to divine providence and the problem of evil, the efforts of theology to clarify the claims of faith seem pitifully weak and unsatisfying'.[16]

Sharing in God's Sufferings

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who paid the ultimate price in his struggle against the Nazi regime during the Second World War, coined a phrase that has since become well known and widely commented upon. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison* he wrote 'Only the suffering God can help'. Bonhoeffer's theology was strongly Christocentric in emphasis. He wrote eloquently on the theme of 'Man Come of Age', a theology which spoke of the adulthood of the world and the outgrowing of the need for religion. As Bonhoeffer searched for an answer to the question, Who is Christ for us today? he came up with a paradoxical proposition namely that the person of faith was to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*, as though God were not given, but to do so 'before God'![17]

> So our coming of age forces us to a true recognition of our situation vis-à-vis God. God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him. The God who

> is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us.[18]

Despite, or perhaps because of, the growth of many enthusiastic, but essentially non-critical forms of Christianity today, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Christian faith remains powerfully authentic, convincing and necessary. Perhaps the most moving of his fragmentary thoughts are those penned after he had received news of the failure of the July 20 plot against Hitler's life.

> Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a converted sinner, a churchman (the priestly type, so-called!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy man. This is what I mean by worldliness - taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is metanoia, and that is what makes a man and a Christian (cf Jeremiah 45). How can success makes us arrogant or failure lead us astray, when we participate in the sufferings of God by living in the world?[19]

These words are the product of someone facing the probability of his own imminent death at the relatively young age of 39 years. In some ways, they echo the views of Calvin, marked as they are with a clear commitment to sharing in God's sufferings in the world, and an attitude of humility and trust. Yet, with Calvin's assault on human pride, there is a coldness in the 'great comfort' he offers us. *'Like it or lump it. It's*

down to you, victim of suffering, how you will respond' is what he seems to say. Bonhoeffer may even agree with Calvin, but his emphasis is very different. For Bonhoeffer, God is the suffering God, who suffers with you, rather than chastises you (albeit 'fatherly' chastisement).[20] To know that God weeps, when you weep, that he is not simply over against you, but also, beside you, is to find comfort and strength that will nerve your arm for the fight.[21]

In Conclusion

While there may be no final answers to the deep and disturbing questions of life, it is important nevertheless to wrestle with the questions in an open and honest way. That there is much grief in life is clear for all to see. Fortunately, within the experience of parish ministry there are also those occasions of sheer, unadulterated joy - the baptising of young infants in normal circumstances, the celebration of marriage, and the experience of regular worship. And for that, along with effective recovery from trauma, we can be thankful. 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow…'.

1 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding,* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2 *ibid.,* pp.101ff.
3 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son,* (1987 reprinted 2001), Grand Rapids, Michigan:Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co.
4 *ibid*. p. 24.
5 *ibid*. p. 16. 'It's so wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before its parents.'
6 *ibid*. pp. 67-68.
7 *ibid*. p. 63.
8 *ibid*. p. 92.
9 *ibid*. pp. 80-81. Not that this solves the mystery of suffering for Wolterstorff for he asks the 'new and more disturbing question' of God. 'Why do you permit yourself to suffer, O God…Why do you not grasp joy? Op. cit. also, p. 80

[10] *ibid*. p. 102.
[11] *ibid*. p. 5.
[12] Daniel L.Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding,* p.105.
[13] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* , ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, vol. 1, p. 702.
[14] *ibid*. p. 702.
[15] *ibid*. p. 703.
[16] Daniel L Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding,* p. 99.
[17] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (Eberhardt Bethge, ed.), London: SCM Press. See p. 196.
[18] William Hamilton, *World Come of Age*, London: Collins, p. 151.
[19] *ibid*. p. 152.
[20] Calvin, *op.cit.,* p. 706.
[21] Bryan D. Spinks and Iain R. Torrance, eds; *To Glorify God – Essays on Modern Reformed Liturgy*, 1999. This contrasts with Kathryn Greene-McCreight's use of the phrase 'but always beside us'. See p. 114.