

absolute justice: why Jesus gives the deepest response to evil

Accessed here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20030723153920/www.anglicanmedia.com.au/old/rcf/absolutejustice.htm>

The phenomenon of evil

A man is going to work and gets into in his four-wheel drive. Unknowingly, as he backs out, he crushes his two-year-old child to death.

A plane flies into a building, followed by another. Within an hour three thousand people are killed.

Two little girls, bright and happy, just ten years old, are brutally murdered in a sleepy English village.

Floods kill thousands of villagers, destroying lives and livelihoods.

An old woman contracts an incurable disease and through years of pain and wasting away, finally dies.

Yesterday (August 26) Philip Adams said that in the twentieth century, 150 million were killed in war and related violence (though why he connected the terrible suffering caused by atheistic communism and Nazism with belief in God is beyond me).

Evil, suffering, call it what you like, is part of the world in which we live. It's all too common. And yet at the same time there is something about it which is mysterious and puzzling. What do we make of it? Why does it exist? Is it natural, or is there something about it that is alien? We certainly feel that it's wrong and shouldn't be there, somehow an intruder, unwelcome, into human and other affairs. But are our feelings right? Is there any hope for its outcome to beat it? Will it always be with us or will it one day disappear?

The big questions evil raises

1. It raises the question. Especially if there is a God or not. If there is God in this world and all that is brought into being by a power or mind of infinite greatness and, I imagine, goodness, why isn't the world somehow better? This has been a puzzle for ages.
2. Maybe not real, an illusion. Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so. "New Age" teachings an alleged god in conversation with a recent author "In truth nothing is evil." "I tell you I despise nothing. None of it is repulsive to me. Evil is that which you humans call evil."
3. Perhaps the answer is that the world is balanced, that those who suffer somehow deserve to suffer. It is their karma, the result of wrong things they have done in earlier lives in some way.
4. Perhaps the problem is that evil occurs because we are too attached to things. We need to discipline our minds and become unattached.

5. Perhaps, because there is this sort of evil, there really is no God. The world is all there is and evil is real but relentless and will ultimately triumph.

Bertrand Russell:

"Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power."

My task is to explain 'why Jesus gives the deepest response to evil'.

My topic that I have been given is 'Absolute Justice: Why Jesus gives the deepest response to evil'. As you will hear, I want to go beyond simply talking about absolute justice. I also want to talk about absolute mercy and identification as well. But I do want to show why Jesus does give the deepest response to evil and something of the power and depth of the Christian faith's perspective on this issue.

So often evil is felt to be a reason not embrace the Christian faith. I understand that kind of reaction. I wonder, however, whether people who make that reaction grasp of the very deep resources that Jesus brings to the issue.

There are many possible responses to evil.

If it's not real, I guess an illusion, then the answer is to stop thinking it is real.

If it's somehow deserved, then be patient and be good and get off the wheel of reincarnation and rebirth.

If it's an inevitable result of desire, stop desiring and detach yourself from the ego. If it is inevitable and will crush all human achievement, then make the most of what we have bravely. Some people take comfort in this world view. There was an ABC reporter whose child born with a disability. "I was comforted by my belief there is no god. This is just one of those things which happens. No need to ask why? or why me?"

The Christian faith is very different

There are three key affirmations.

1. That evil and suffering are real, not illusory, nor the expression of some hidden and relentless just law. Not to be overcome simply by the discipline of mind or behaving so well that you get out of the inevitable rule of cause and desert. It's a genuine massive problem.

2. It affirms secondly that there is a living and true God who is the creator and sustainer of all that is. Who does not grow faint nor weary, whose understanding is unsearchable, who has himself taught that there is nothing outside of his care.

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

For some this is just as helpful as the belief there is no God can be for others. A friend of mine who lost her husband in a terrible accident: 'I wouldn't have known how to cope unless I knew God was in control'.

3. Affirms at the heart of the Christian gospel God is in the process defeating evil. God is acting so that evil is not the last word.

So why is there evil?

When faced with the logical dilemma of Scottish philosopher David Hume:

'If God is willing to prevent evil, is he not able? Then is he impotent? Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. If he is both able and willing, whence is evil?'

the Christian faith has had to be content with the answer given by St Augustine, North African Roman leader of the fifth century,

'God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not permit evil to exist at all'.

But while the philosophical discussion is interesting for those involved, it is normally unsatisfactory as a genuine response to issues of evil.

Evil as intrusion

The Christian faith certainly recognises evil as an unnatural intruder. This is what our own natural instincts lead us to hold. It is why we are outraged. Though evil is common (and in that sense natural) we deeply revolt against it. The Christian faith holds that this sense of revolt is in touch with reality. There has been an intrusion, some primeval calamity.

Human and angelic beings have rebelled, fallen from their intention. There is something deeply wrong in how the creation has gone on.

Human sin not underestimated. One writer puts it like this:

"But the structure of sin in the human personality is something far more complicated than isolated acts and thoughts of deliberate disobedience commonly designated by the word. [Sin] is something much more akin to the psychological term complex: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behaviour deeply rooted in our alienation from God. [...] An unconscious reservoir of darkness."

And the creation itself,

It is to quote the apostle Paul, undoubtedly 'subjected to futility' or 'in bondage to decay', though St Paul goes on to say that this has been done in hope that we will be set free from these and obtain 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'.

The Christian understands some of the suffering in our world to be the result of God's own judgement upon human evil,

(a) (as Paul puts it in Romans chapter 1) giving people up to their own rebellious and debased thinking, letting them loose to experience in their own beings the consequences of refusing to acknowledge God as he should be acknowledged.

(b) By God's judgments

The Psalms contain many protests against evil as well as an acceptance that God's own just response to human evil itself creates suffering:

Psalm 90

⁷ For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.

So what is the answer?

It is in the Bible that you will find many eloquent protests against the reality of evil.

²³ Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not cast us off forever!
²⁴ Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
²⁵ For we sink down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
²⁶ Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. Psalm 44: 23

The most eloquent cry Psalm 22 ,

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Alvin Platinga, who is one of the best philosophers of religion in the world today, has written extensively on the issues for the Christian. He logically defends the Christian faith against Hume's dilemma but admits this is in the long run inadequate.

Christian must therefore admit that he doesn't know why God permits the evils this world displays. This can be deeply perplexing, and deeply disturbing. [...] No doubt there isn't any logical incompatibility between God's power and knowledge and goodness, on one hand, and the existence of the evils we see on the other [...] No doubt, but this is cold and abstract comfort when faced with the shocking concreteness of a particularly appalling exemplification of evil. [...]

The God of Christianity and is willing to enter into and share the suffering of his creatures, in order to redeem them and his world. Of course this doesn't answer the question *why does God permit evil?* But it helps the Christian trust God as loving father no matter what ills befall him.

Alvin

Platinga

3. Jesus' coming: the deepest response to evil

Not give an explanation but a resolution with evil.

Rather than be embarrassed or want to hide from evil, Christian faith the heart is the hope over evil

Jesus is he response to evil that Jesus' work is seen..

He came announcing the Kingdom of God,
that is, that God would become king over his rebellious, suffering creation.
What he means by that is caught perhaps by the Lord's Prayer.
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.'

Jesus' miraculous acts of power were all God's saving liberation from evil, sickness, bondage to spiritual forces, the terrifying damage of the created order.

He taught and enacted God's gracious reconciliation and restoration of lost humanity.

He himself suffered terrible human evil (I will come back to this in just a moment).

Our testimony based on that of his first followers that he was indeed literally raised from the dead.

Not simply restored to life nor existing in some spiritual world beyond death but had overcome death itself, that it had no more hold on him.

That is the deep response to evil.

(a) Judgment

The deepest answer to Hume's supposedly airtight logic on the justice of God is that having been raised Jesus will 'come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end'.

Although a large time gap between Jesus' coming and resurrection from his coming in judgment again at the end of the age, the Christian gospel links them entirely. Part of one great act of God.

Paul's words to the sceptical philosophers of Athens make the point. Acts 17:30

³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

It is according to the gospel of Jesus Christ that he will come to judge the secret things of human beings (Romans 2).

This truth not welcome as we don't want to be accountable.

Not just a judgment but a putting right a overcoming and defeating evil

That one day even death itself will be destroyed together with evil in all its forms in a new heavens and a new earth.

God's deepest response to evil will be the resurrection of the dead, the restoration of lost and broken humanity and refurbishment of creation which has been marred and suffering.

The whole creation will be set free from its bondage from decay and obtain the glory of the liberty of the children of God.

There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

The Christian gospel proclaims that God has not given up on his creation nor is impotent. Nor will evil be the final word. Trampling march of unconscious power is not the final word.

Not the beginning of creation, nor will it be its climax.

(b) God's mercy

You may ask, why doesn't God act sooner? Why is he taking so long? Is he insensitive to our sufferings?

The Bible says that this is in fact paradoxically the result of God's mercy.

'The Lord is forbearing towards you, not wishing that any perish but that all should reach repentance' (2 Peter).

In a revealing vision of the book of Revelation, the martyrs' suffering, prostration, death are told to wait: 'Sovereign Lord, how long?' they ask. God answers, 'A little longer until the number of your fellow servants and their brothers and sisters should be complete who are to be killed as you have been' (Revelation 6:10).

God's mercy can lead to objections of evil.

In the delightful story of Jonah, the prophet is told to go and tell the hated pagan superpower Nineveh with all its violence, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown'.

Yet when Jonah delivers his message, he is outraged when Nineveh repents and God also repents of his judgement

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (Jonah 4.1-2)

And God's mercy is such that apparently even after two thousand years' worth of martyrs and even crusades and holocausts it not enough to exhaust it.

Not presume on God's mercy meant to lead us to change repentance.

(c) Incarnation

God's coming into his creation to give the deepest response to evil.

Incarnation = the living God of all creation take humanity actually live one of us. Like a author becoming a character really.

In the response to evil God's justice and mercy are involved and yet either can create a problem.

Either God mercifully revokes his death sentence on disobedient humanity and so breaks his word and compromises his justice

or let human sin and God's just wrath destroy those created in his image, itself an embarrassing concession to evil.

God overcomes this dilemma of justice or mercy by his own coming into his created order. The is the heart of the matter.

'The Creator comes into dying creation to reassert his rule and to bring the created and corrupted nature of humanity to its intended destination.'

The most difficult problem for the Christian message in the ancient world was not the problem of evil but the worship of a crucified man.

The message of the cross which was 'foolishness and a stumbling block to both the Greek and the Jew'.

so unacceptable but central. Not have the Christian faith without this.

The Christian gospel proclaims that the living God took humanity to himself, fully human and fully God, and entered into this suffering of rebellious creation.

And that Son of God was obedient even to death upon the cross

The cry of protest, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?',
the protest of the Son of God upon the cross
suffering in his humanity all the horrors of evil
and in his divinity God feeling and losing his Son and all the pain and suffering of the world.

The unique contribution of the Christian gospel to evil is that God's deepest response was to experience and bear it.

For whatever reason "God judged it better to bring good out of evil rather than not permit evil at all". It included he himself suffering it. With us and for us.

A moral victory

A victory oncoming the meaningless and pollution of evil

This does not remove his judgement 'even the bloodthirsty God of Revelation is not Dirty Harry, daring sinners to make his day, but "the Lamb who was slain for the ransom of many" (Revelation 5:9)'