

WERE THEY WORSE OFFENDERS?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday of Lent, 20 March 2022

The gospels deal somewhat lightly with Pontius Pilate, concentrating on his apparent reluctance to crucify Jesus. His surrender to priestly pressure makes him appear weak rather than cruel. This is far from the truth. Pilate was insensitive to the Jewish religion and culture and ruthless in his approach. Both Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher, and Josephus, the Jewish historian, tell how he came into the city carrying military ensigns bearing the emperor's image.² Other governors had used ensigns without such images. He also raided the temple treasury for funds to build an aqueduct. Both these events were attended by violent protests.

We do not know anything about the event when Pilate mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. We do know that Galilee was the location of a revolt against the census ordered by governor Quirinius that Luke records as part of his birth narratives.³ This revolt was put down with ferocity and is regarded by Josephus as one of the origins of the wars that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. It appears that some Galileans had recently come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice. Something, possibly a noisy demonstration, happened to cause Pilate's soldiers to intervene with the already suspect Galileans and kill some or all of them. Josephus records that Pilate used to disguise his soldiers and mingle them with crowds in case of trouble.

Siloam is a low-lying area of Jerusalem where the Pool of Siloam is located.⁴ We do not know exactly what happened, but Luke has Jesus saying that 18 people were killed when a tower collapsed.

This is not just a lesson about the difficulties of life in 1st century Jerusalem. Imagine Jesus in Queen's Square this morning. Someone asks him about the war in Ukraine. In response, he mentions the devastating floods in NSW and Queensland.

Why did those who were present mention the Galileans to Jesus? They may have heard him speak about the restoration of God's kingdom and challenged him about a happening that made that restoration unlikely. Jesus' response opens the can of worms that theologians call 'theodicy'. Put simply, theodicy seeks to justify God in the presence of evil. Why does God allow suffering? Even in an apparently secular society, this is a live issue. It appeared in a Wilcox cartoon in last Monday's *Sydney Morning Herald*.

¹ Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

² Philo, *Legation ad Gaium*, 37-38; [Philo: On the Embassy to Gaius \(earlychristianwritings.com\)](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com); Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.1-2; 4.1-2 [The Antiquities of the Jews by Flavius Josephus - Full Text Free Book \(Part 20/26\) \(fulltextarchive.com\)](http://www.fulltextarchive.com)

³ Luke 2:1-5. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.5.2

⁴ The pool is memorialised in Bishop Reginald Heber's hymn, 'By cool Siloam's shady rill'. Heber was Bishop of Calcutta and thus in charge of Sydney when St James was being constructed.



The Bible is aware of this problem of unjustified and unjustifiable suffering. The Psalmist says:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?⁵

... words that were famously used by Jesus on the cross. Indeed, there is no answer that can be given to such a question when it comes from one who suffers. It is a cry from the heart, not a challenge to a debate.

After the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, some Christian leaders suggested that the tsunami was either the voluntary act of an inscrutable God or, worse, an act of vengeance from an angry God. This appears to be the implication in the discussion that the temple event and the tower collapse provoked.

Jesus has a two-pronged answer. First, he challenges the idea that the sins of the Galileans caused their death. There was apparently a link between what they did in the temple and Pilate's reaction. But were they killed because they were sinners? Jesus says no. Next, Jesus mentions accidental deaths, those of the unfortunate victims of architectural failure. Were they sinners of such significance as to merit their deaths? Jesus says no.

In this encounter Jesus specifically denies that either an accident or the oppression of the Roman rulers came about because of the sins of those who suffered. Rather, Jesus says, everyone is liable to a judgement for what they do. If there is a judgement for sin, everyone is liable to it. Furthermore, Jesus suggests an image of a God who does not principally relate to persons through terror, through disaster and accident, or through random events.

⁵ Psalm 22:1

In John's gospel Jesus had an encounter with a man born blind:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."⁶

Again, Jesus denies that the man's blindness comes from sins, either his own or his parents'. But what about the reason Jesus gave for the blindness? We might think that Jesus is saying that the man was born blind so that Jesus could heal him and thus show God's works, which would seem to be even worse than punishing him for sin. If so, we would be wrong, because the reason Jesus gives for the man's birth is the same reason that applies to us all. We all should reveal God's works. Thus, the words of Jesus are a resounding affirmation of the humanity of this man, blind or sighted. In his response, Jesus also hints at a God who works from within. He suggests that God's glory will be 'in him', not come from outside.

In summary, therefore, Jesus gives no justification for the suggestion that pain and suffering are God's judgements. On the contrary, Jesus rejects outright any such proposition. In so rejecting, Jesus also implies a very different God from the one predicated by his questioners.

The events of today's gospel are of two kinds. The first event is the result of human decisions, particularly those of an authoritarian Roman official. We may call it an evil act, just as we may call the acts of President Putin evil. It is unclear how we should regard the actions of the soldiers involved, some of whom may appear to have little understanding of what they are doing and why. The question is, what do we expect God to do about?

The collapse of the Siloam tower may be regarded as a natural disaster but not exactly in the same terms as a tsunami or a flood. The tower may have been poorly built, which makes its fall a result of human negligence. Alternatively, its foundations may have shifted for natural reasons. Many of the disasters in this category come from natural forces that we rely on for all parts of our lives, the laws of physics, for example. We have a problem if we suggest that God should suspend them from time to time. We rely on their very inability to be suspended.

Natural events and human activity are less easy to separate than we might suppose. The Siloam tower collapse may have been the result of negligence. The same might be said of our recent floods. The events themselves are the results of the laws of nature. The way those laws operate may be influenced by our actions or lack of them. We would be foolish to want to prevent the consequences of what we do, since we also cause good. The way out of these consequences is to do different and better. The question is again what we expect God to do when things go wrong.

We could have what I sometimes call a 'parking space' view of the way God acts in day-to-day affairs. Here am I driving around a crowded city looking for a place to park my car and there is none. So, I pray to God, reminding him of my various virtues, hoping that he will overlook my self-seeking motivation and the less than honest account of my sins, and find me a parking spot. Given that I am, in my own estimation at least, a devout Christian, I may even assume that God has more interest in satisfying my trivial desires than those of, for example, a Muslim refugee child.

⁶ John 9:1-3a

We all need reminding, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that ‘God is not upset that Gandhi was not a Christian, because *God is not a Christian!*’,⁷ any more than God is an Englishman or male. Thus, we can make no assumptions about who has God’s regard.

God is not a relatively distant and powerful figure who makes forays into the world to correct something or to favour somebody. St John’s gospel describes a different kind of God in these words:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.⁸

This is a God who is participatory. This is a God who shares human life rather than controlling it in its detail. That is why I noted earlier that the words of Jesus implied a God who does not work through accident or disaster but who affirms humanity in its various forms.

This message is important for us as we make our way through Lent towards Holy Week and Easter. We are about to remember the most significant event of suffering in human history. This event is what helps us to make sense of our world alongside the God who is with us.

There is no satisfactory account of suffering. Both our emotions and our intellect fail us in the face of the contradictions that our questions entail. For this reason, I turn often to poetry and, in this case, the poetry of R S Thomas. As Mark Oakley commented,

Many of Thomas’s poems show a rather callous God, or a God who has limits in his omnipotence, a God unable to make pain disappear, and so a God found in a crucifixion—what he refers at one point as a longbow drawn against love. Such a God does not confirm our prejudices, or indulge our fantasies. Instead, discovery and revelation occur when we put aside the wrong questions, when we do not selfishly seek a God who justifies us, but the one who saves us.⁹

We have had names for you:
The Thunderer, the Almighty
Hunter, Lord of the snowflake
and the sabre-toothed tiger.
One name we have held back
unable to reconcile it
with the mosquito, the tidal wave,
the black hole into which
time will fall. You have answered
us with the image of yourself
on a hewn tree, suffering
injustice, pardoning it;
pointing as though in either
direction; horrifying us
with the possibility of dislocation.
Ah, love, with your arms out
wide, tell us how much more
they must still be stretched

⁷ Desmond Tutu, interview at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/143/story_14326_1.html. See also Rosemary Reuther, ‘Asking the existential questions,’ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1753>

⁸ John 1:14

⁹ Mark Oakley, ‘This bleak and sacrificial day’, *Church Times*, 4 April 2012, [‘This bleak and sacrificial day’ \(churchtimes.co.uk\)](http://churchtimes.co.uk)

to embrace a universe drawing
away from us at the speed of light.¹⁰

¹⁰ [Living Wittily: Lent with R S Thomas. Favourite Poems 6 "Ah, love, with your arms out wide..." \(typepad.com\)](#)

