

16 November 2008

California Fires and God's Providence

So, does God care?

Yesterday and today we in Los Angeles woke up with our city once again ringed by fire, perhaps the worst in many years. Our tvs and computers are packed with visions of hell: houses burning, distraught people, weary firefighters. Some of our own parishioners have been evacuated or voluntarily left their homes for safer ground. We pray (thank you, Daughters of the King!!) and wonder if our prayers have any effect; do they matter?

This is but the latest and closest example of a more general question, that of human suffering in a universe created by a loving God. If God is powerful and loving, will He not save Her beloved from pain? I recently saw once again a classic movie, *Judgment at Nuremburg*, produced in 1962, about the trial in 1948 by the Allies of four judges in Nazi Germany. One of the main points, though not the only one, was, of course, the Holocaust, the murder of millions of God's children. Human suffering, as well as human evil, was front and center.

We have visited this question before but I think it appropriate today to visit it once again. Why is there suffering; does God care; do our prayers matter? We have time only to sketch a response, but let's give it a try.

Why is there suffering? If evil is that which hurts or destroys part of God's creation, then there are two kinds of evil: natural and human. Natural evil is the human suffering that comes from the working out of the natural laws of the universe: space, time, gravity, nuclear forces – volcanoes erupt, fires burn, oceans drown, airplanes fall from the sky, cancer kills. This is the death and destruction that comes when frail human flesh or fragile human constructions are demolished by overwhelming natural forces. Part of the answer here is that the forces that can kill us are the very forces that make life possible: gravity, oxidation, the transfer of mass and energy, the regenerative forces of biology. There is no intentional malign force; we simply suffer from the working out of the way of the universe. God doesn't cause evil, but then neither does She save from it.

Then, of course, there is human-caused evil: arsonists, thieves, abusers, murderers – the list is depressingly long; our movies, novels, poetry, paintings, prisons catalog the occurrences. Could not a knowing, loving God intervene in sentient life to prevent this?

The answer to both of these facets of the same question turns out to be the same, and that answer is illuminated by our own human life. If we think of human life as the equivalent of infants and children, then we can expect that a loving Father/Mother would protect us from all that harms. In this scenario, God has failed us. But if we think of human life as tantamount to adulthood, we see a different picture. When parents or others protect too much, their children or wards do not develop properly or fully; they remain infantile in many aspects of their personalities. Struggle, with its inevitable victories and defeats, is necessary for human growth. *Why* that should be is another question, but that it is so is a constant experience of human life. So the short form of the answer is freedom. God gives us the freedom to become our mature, full selves. Part of that freedom is hurtful, part of it is boring, part of it is ecstatic. I would not want to live in a world where my every moment was monitored like a two-year-old's. That means that sometimes I fall down, burn my fingers, eat the wrong stuff, mess my pants. But it is the adult me that gets to live fully, not some infantile version. So, though it seems a bit abstract, freedom really is a sufficient reason for the existence of suffering in our world. Freedom gives us our best selves.

Our second question: does God care? For Christians, the answer is “Yes, passionately!” And, as always, our orthodox compass points to Jesus Christ. If Jesus is only a human teacher unfairly executed by a brutal state, then we have no answer. But if, as orthodox Christian theology has proclaimed through the centuries, Jesus is the way that God found to live with us, suffer with us, rejoice with us, die with us, then our only answer to the question is that God cares in the full measure of a human life and death, a human life that also carries a Divine Person, a Divine Reality. Emmanuel is the answer; God-with-us is the answer. It is such an astounding answer, that millions find it too good to be true. From their experience of brokenness, they cannot credit such compassion on the part of God. But Christians point to the ultimate brokenness of death, and then proclaim a resurrection from death witnessed by hundreds initially and experienced by billions since. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus prove for the Christian the

compassion of God. God does care, and Her caring is as mysterious as life and death themselves.

Our third question: do our prayers matter? The skeptic points to all the occasions in which prayer seemingly has failed. The fire burns, the house is destroyed, marriages fail, children go wrong, parents make mistakes, we lose our job and our security, grandmother dies. What the skeptic often misses but should include is the blood-drenched prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed passionately not to die. We all know the answer to that prayer. So, if the prayer of God-Himself-in-Jesus is not answered the way Jesus wants it, what chance do we mere mortals have? I've struggled with this question for years.

Lately, I'm beginning to see a partial answer, I think. I see prayer as our participation in God's creative power and energies. When we pray, we are exercising by the gift of God Himself the power of God to create and save and preserve. It is, of course, an enormous power, the power that holds the universe in existence and our hearts in thrall. But those creative, saving, preserving energies do not always produce what God wants, precisely because of the freedom that God has given into the universe. So God allows Himself to be limited by the freedom of Her creatures, allows things to exist which He does not want. We have but to read our newspapers and watch our tv and read our novels to know that.

As with God's creating, saving, preserving power, so with our prayer power. Sometimes we and God get what we want. Sometimes we don't. But the "don't" is no reason not to pray, any more than the universe's hurt would be a reason not to create. What we have to do is what God has to do: throw ourselves into the freedom the struggle, the defeat, the victory. We throw ourselves into the ways of God with the universe because Jesus shows us that our prayers and our participation matter. We may not get what we pray for; we will get resurrection instead.

That is what God has promised in Jesus. That is what God has accomplished in Jesus. That is what God gives to us in Jesus.

Does God care? You betcha! Let's all join in the caring.