



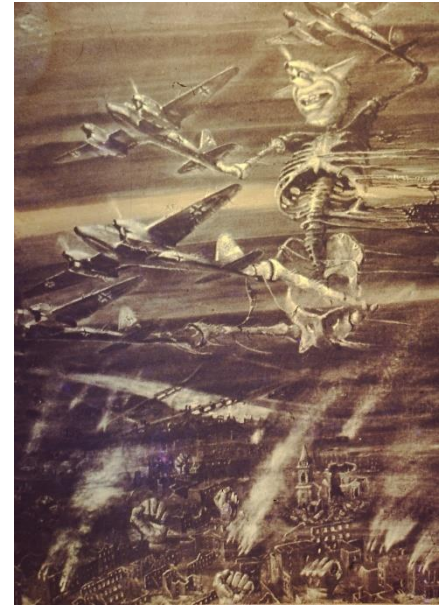
Wey Valley Methodist Circuit – Pastoral Letter 2022 Rev Barrie Tabraham

“Thoughts on Suffering”

This striking picture and the one below both date from 1939 and the invasion of Poland, and were two of the slides I used many years ago when I taught history in Banbury. I don't know who drew and painted them, but the horror and grief caused by war – especially to those who suffer most (families and children) – has not changed in the intervening 83 years.

At the time of writing, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine is in its 10th day, and although you will have heard many words reported and spoken about the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, I felt it incumbent upon me to offer a little theological reflection on the subject of undeserved suffering.

The Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx offers the comment that: *It is no part of the argument to say that undeserved suffering is 'better' for me since I will be rewarded in the world to come, and perhaps even now. Redemptive suffering can actually benefit others.* That is a startling claim, and I have to say that there's no guarantee that such behaviour will work. Sometimes it doesn't. That is why Jesus, by his example, invites us to display a vulnerable love which is open to rejection.



William Vanstone in that spiritual classic, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, speaks very movingly about: *love expended in self-giving, precarious endeavour, ever poised upon the brink of failure – yet ever finding, in the challenge of tragedy, new strength to redeem and restore again the possibility of triumph.*



Forgive the quotations, but I make no apology for leaning on the wisdom of those who have so influenced me over the years. The final one is from Jürgen Moltmann, (himself a prisoner-of-war) writing in *The Crucified God*. It's not an easy read (being a translation from the German), but worth reflecting upon:

The cross stands between the Father and Son in all the harshness of its forsakenness. If one describes the life of God within the Trinity as the 'history of God', this history of God contains within itself the whole abyss of God-forsakenness, absolute death and the non-God.... Because this death took place in the history between Father and Son on the cross of Golgotha, there proceeds from it the spirit of life, love and election to salvation....

There is no suffering which in this history of God is not God's suffering; no death which has not been God's death.... therefore there is no life, no fortune, and no joy which have not been integrated by his history into eternal life, the eternal joy of God. (p. 246)

I can do no better than to offer you some familiar words of St Paul. He is so confident in our ultimate victory that he invents a new Greek word to express his confidence in Christ: 'hypernikomen' (we have the word 'nike' – 'victory') which literally means 'over-conquer'. In other words, we don't just struggle through and persevere grimly to the end – we will win a complete victory with God's help, because His love is the strongest power in the universe.

(Romans 8 : 28, 31 – 39)

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

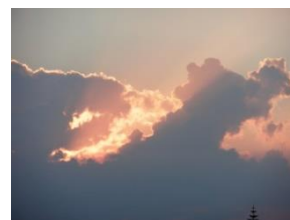
³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷ No, in all these things ***we are more than conquerors*** through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [*The italics are mine, Ed.*]

The challenge to you and I, of course, is verse 28! Our love for God is the key, the mainspring of everything else we do. That's all He asks of us, and that's all that is needed, for none of the time in which God is loved and served is ever wasted. My own 'answer' to this huge, intractable question of suffering, is part of a verse from one of Timothy Rees' hymns:

*And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then they find that selfsame aching
Deep within the heart of God. (StF 103)*

For us to pray: Loving God, the subject of suffering troubles us, because we have few answers, if any. We pray for all who suffer today – especially those who suffer through no fault of their own. Help us so to respond to your love with love of our own, that your Spirit may work for good, in and through us, that we may be led in the ways of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. **Amen.**



May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Barrie Tabraham