

One of the most oft-repeated arguments about the existence, or otherwise, of God is 'The Problem of Evil' and it goes something like this. There is obviously evil in the world, which causes heartache and suffering, whether someone's deliberate acts upon fellow humans, and we've seen enough of that in recent times, or so-called natural evil, fire, earthquakes, flood, famine and the like. If God was omnipotent, all powerful, he could stop it if he wished. If God was omniscient, all knowing, he could stop it if he wished. If God was a loving God, he would stop all evil. So the problem is that seemingly, God cannot be all loving, all knowing and all seeing and still allow evil to persist. (But perhaps these omni-words are not very helpful; for instance, whilst God can make an object so heavy that I cannot lift it, he cannot make it so heavy that *he* cannot lift it; but I digress) The philosopher Leibniz coined the phrase 'Theodicy' from the Greek words for God and justice, to allow vindication of the divine attributes of holiness and justice in allowing the existence of physical and moral evil. The Old Testament is not much help here, with the notion of 'God as King' – a warrior who destroys whole nations and sends plague and famine. The closest it gets, perhaps, is in the book of Job where our hero has his idyllic life taken away to see if he will reject God. The philosophical arguments in the book open with Job sitting on a dung heap, scratching himself with a piece of broken pot and griping about how life has taken a turn for the worse. However, he does not reject God, but moans at him, asking why he, of all people, should suffer when others, far more wicked than him, should live the good life and go unpunished. Eventually, God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind, saying in Chapter 38, "Where were you when I made the world". In other words, 'what do you know about it?' Effectively God is telling Job that he has no right to ask the question.

But how often have I heard people ask "How can there be a God when there is so much suffering and wickedness in the world?" thus questioning that there cannot be a God. This is not a very coherent or well-thought through argument. When I was about fifteen, I was taken to see Mr Pickwick, a musical playing in the Saville Theatre in Shaftsbury Avenue (now the Odeon Covent Garden, a four-screen cinema). By that age I knew it was not my sort of thing, but I suppose my parents enjoyed it. At one point, Mr Pickwick, being played by Harry Secombe, was in the dock in a courtroom, when half the set collapsed. So Harry Secombe stood at the front of the stage for about ten minutes telling jokes whilst the stage crew rebuilt the set. It was by far the highlight of the evening for me! In this musical, Harry was to sing the now famous song "If I ruled the World, every day would be the first day of spring" which subsequently became his theme song. However, this is simply another way of saying "If I was God, I'd do it better".

In the latter half of the 20th century, the philosopher John Hick wrote his book 'Evil and the God of Love'. In it, he expounds that God created this world – with all its potential evil and suffering – to serve as a "Vale of Human Soul-making". It is possible for humans to know God, but they can only do so by freely exercising a faith-response, an uncompelled action.

And here in our Epistle today, we see the New Testament form of the Theodicy, made philosophically viable by Hick. Paul says “let us boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.” Suffering, Endurance, Character, Hope. Paul is saying to the Roman church that when we rely utterly on God’s grace and not at all upon ourselves, we have peace, become reconciled with God and the hope of sharing the glory of God; and although we had fallen far short of the glorious destiny God had intended for us, we now find ourselves confidently expecting it. Christ in death has borne the consequences of our sin and thus reconciled us to God. Paul never speaks of God’s being reconciled to us; it is us who were estranged. We would do well, I think, to remember that the words of Jesus and all the teachings of Paul, are focused on the afterlife, heaven, and the means to re-establish our perfect relationship to God. It is not part of God’s plan to make us worship him by ensuring a happy and trouble-free life whilst we muddle along in our sinful, selfish state.

We do have a part to play in this, too. St Paul’s major message is that a person can achieve justification, or sinless purity, in God’s eyes by faith alone and he implores his readers to give up everything and focus solely on God, but then he thought the end of the world was imminent. In the 21st century, this is no longer practical unless you are in an enclosed monastic order and the Gospels, all written after Paul’s letters, give us instruction as to how we should live our lives. One of the most important concepts of this is how we interact with our fellow humans and the most vital aspect is discipleship. It is no accident that the very first goal in Bishop Andrew’s Diocesan Vision “Transforming Church, Transforming Lives” is ‘Making Disciples’ and the biblical foundations for this are laid down in our gospel reading for today. In the first part, the end of Chapter 9, Jesus is continuing his work of teaching in the synagogues, curing every disease and sickness, and sees that the following was helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The phrase ‘Sheep without a shepherd’ is used several times in the Old Testament to denote that the people have become separate from God’s protection and grace; the final verse, “The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” is a call to the disciples to seek God’s assistance in bringing the people back to God. Then Jesus gives his twelve closest disciples, here called ‘Apostles’ their commission and instructions, giving them authority over every disease and sickness as well as unclean spirits, so called because the effect of the condition was to separate the sufferer from the formal worship of God. Jesus is continually battling with the entrenched Jewish notion that those who are healthy and wealthy are smiled upon by God for their goodness, whilst the suffering and poor are sinners in the eyes of society.

The disciples are listed here and, whilst the same list is found in Matthew's Gospel, it differs slightly from Luke and John's Gospel which seem to give us a different name or two. The initial mission of the disciples is amongst the towns and cities of the Jews, perhaps because they would readily understand the central message they were passing on namely the good news that the "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". The Gentile mission was to come later. So, like all who find belief, our burden of discipleship is to live our lives in the example of Christ and his disciples, to guide the sheep without a shepherd and to wear our faith on our sleeves as an example to all. Church is not just for Sundays.