

Explanations of human suffering—whether as God’s will, bad karma, comeuppance—harm more than heal. Reason cannot reach the heart’s pain. Presence, being with the sufferer in her sorrow, is the better response.

The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer—think about how hard it is to watch the news from Ukraine—is a very rare and difficult thing. It is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.

Do you think the pregnant woman carried on a stretcher out of a bombed maternity hospital in Mariupol, who later died along with her baby, was any worse a sinner than any other pregnant women? Do you think the citizens of Mariupol, who are living in “medieval conditions” if they are still living, are any worse sinners than citizens of any other city?

Every three years when we read this story from the Luke, examples of senseless suffering are “breaking news.” Three years ago it was Christians murdered at prayer in Charleston, Jews murdered at prayer in Pittsburg, Muslims murdered at prayer in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Three years before that it was women with the Zika virus giving birth to children with microcephaly. Before that it was 3,000 people who died when terrorists flew planes into the twin towers.

Before that it was Albanians killed in Kosovo by Serbian police, Palestinian laborers murdered by Israeli soldiers, and a gondola full of skiers hurtling more than 300 feet to their death when a Marine Corps jet flew too fast and too low, shearing off a cable.

Rabbinic theology at the time of Jesus did indeed establish a connection between crime and punishment. Does not the degree of violence connected with the death correspond to the gravity of the sin?

Like many of our contemporaries—“Remember that the Ukrainian government is incredibly corrupt and is incredibly evil”—those to whom Jesus addressed himself must have thought that by means of such a cruel death, God had imposed a sentence for sins that were particular serious. In their eyes, the punishment was evidence of the scale of the hidden vices.

Jesus rejects the logic that mechanically establishes a link between guilt and punishment. To be sure, he does not deny the guilt of the Galileans, nor that of each and every person, but he refuses to declare it to be greater because of a more tragic death. Jesus opposed any conception of blind and cruel divine justice.

Christians do not escape history or its vagaries any more than do atheists, agnostics, or Muslims. We are as vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life as anyone else. Regardless of how lucky, good, blessed or privileged we might be, at some time we will walk through the bleak valley of suffering.

Job, the most fortunate man of his time, suffered greatly. Insisting upon his innocence, Job challenged his friend's theology. If Job is innocent, his friend's way of thinking about God and the world is wrong. His friends cannot accept facts contrary to their theology without confronting their own vulnerability.

In the long history of the church, small misunderstandings of scripture have metastasized into enormous doctrines, ponderous enough to overwhelm and disguise the actual original messages of texts.

Do you think predestination, penal substitutionary atonement, the impotence of human good works in salvation, an unscalable wall between nature and grace, or inherited guilt, constitute the very essence of Christian faith? If you do, you are not alone. Such ideas have long been seen as the primary and proper categories for a correct understanding of the faith.

If our minds are not to be held captive by ideas that cannot be true in any possible world, we have no choice but to trust an inner command, as Job did, and place everything at stake in order to express what seems to us to be true. The work of human thought should withstand the test of brutal, naked reality. If it cannot, it is worthless.

A soldier lying under machine-gun fire on a street in an embattled city, knows an intellectual and spiritual displacement that will not be satisfied with magical thinking or pious sentiments. Reasoning which orders one to by-pass a fact when a concept, a political ideology, a doctrine, comes into conflict with reality must eventually lead to costly errors and bitter disappointment.

Jesus is focused not on the origin of the misfortune but on the future of the living. He challenges his questioners to move up from occupying spectator seats in the theater to being actors on the stage. It is much easier and safer to observe suffering from a distance, than to participate in the struggle for good over evil.

Suffering, according to John O'Donohue, is the sister of your future possibility. Suffering can open a window in the mind held captive by propaganda, by half-truths, by lies, by heresy. While you are going through the dark valley, it is almost impossible to understand what is happening to you. While you are in pain, you can see and understand nothing. The light of suffering is always a gift it leaves as it departs.

Truth is difficult to reach and endure, but it is always the doorway to new freedom and life. When we receive the courage to stand gracefully in the place of pain, we mediate for others the gifts that help heal their torment. Compassion, suffering with another, is a very rare and difficult thing. It is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.