

GOD AND EVIL

MORALITY GOOD AND bad features in this issue of *Compass*. The sources of our moral principles and teachings are studied, and we are encouraged to reflect on sublime moral behaviour as well as deep depravity. Truly, we live in a highly complex world, a world of contrasts and contradictions. Human beings can rise to great heights or sink to deep lows.

We must wonder at the fact that God almighty allows all this to happen. God encourages the good, and we rejoice at that. But God at the same time allows the bad, and that is not so easy for us to understand. How can God, a good and loving God, allow innocent people to suffer so terribly? God encourages the good and allows the bad: it would be so much better, we might feel, if God were to encourage the good and *obstruct* the bad.

Although natural disasters, when bad things happen to good people, are not moral events insofar as no-one is judged worthy of blame, they do add to our perplexity. As we watch the distressing images of destruction, death and loss caused by the floods, fires and earthquakes in Australia, New Zealand and now in Japan, we ask the question again: how can a good and loving God allow all this destruction and misery?

Attempts at answering this question are ultimately unsatisfying. Nonetheless, they can have some weight.

For instance, when we reflect on natural disasters, we must accept the fact that God is the Creator of the universe, not a puppeteer continually readjusting his creation along the way. We read in the book of Genesis that God's Spirit is at work in creation bringing order out of chaos (cf. Gen. 1:2: 'The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters'). But the creation itself is a natural product of ongoing natural—cosmic, geological, and evolutionary—processes. These processes involve a lot

of death and destruction as well as order and life and beauty.

Then when we reflect on the evil that people do and the misery it can cause, we need to keep in mind that this evil and misery result from the misuse of the freedom that our Maker has endowed us human beings with. The gift of freedom is a far greater good than the great evil and misery that sometimes—often—results from its misuse. The proper use of freedom can result in sublime moral goodness to the benefit of many people.

But still we are not satisfied and we ask why God almighty and all-loving does not *obstruct* some of the evil—moral and natural evil—that is visited upon innocent people. Surely it is within God's power to do so?

At this point we might consider that we have run out of reasoned defences of God and God's goodness. We have no more arguments to offer. We must bow before the mystery of God, which is a concession that our arguments are insufficient but not an act of surrender. God reveals himself in his creation and in his Word as divine mystery, infinitely more hidden than revealed.

And God has revealed himself especially and most completely—as John tells us in his Gospel—in Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son, dying on a cross at the hands of evil men. God all-powerful and all-loving, allowed and did not impede that from happening to his own Son. We are called to contemplate the mystery of Christ taking on the whole of our human condition including the evil and suffering that is visited upon us.

This is not a reply to the question, 'Why does God permit evil and suffering, especially the evil and suffering experienced by innocent people?' It is not a reply in discursive or reasoned argument. Rather, it is to align one mystery—the evil, from natural and moral sources that people suffer—with another mystery—the

evil that was visited on the supremely innocent Son of God. God almighty and all-loving does not impede any of it!

But morality is a feature of our everyday lives, not just the highs and lows. It has been a long period of Ordinary Time between the Christmas and the Lenten seasons this year. On the Sundays during this between times we worked our way through the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel readings, hearing Jesus' teachings on how to live. 'Do not be anxious and fret about what is of lesser importance; build on firm foundations; you have heard it said....but I say to you to be much more radical in your moral lives than that.....'.

These teachings of Jesus are about our everyday lives and how we should live them. Jesus is telling us that it is in the everyday events of our lives, the ordinary challenges, the encounters, ways of relating to others, that we meet God and respond to God.

We were told on one Sunday to 'be holy as I your God am holy'. We might do well to take a fresh look at this holiness that God commands of us. We grew up with certain images of 'holiness'. We have 'holy cards' and pictures and statues of saints depicting people in 'holy' postures—hands joined, rapt in prayer, with haloes round their heads. Such images present us with an other-worldly notion of holiness, not the everyday holiness that Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Such images tend to promote the dualism (disjunction of our 'spiritual'

life and 'secular' life) that Pope John-Paul described as 'one of the more serious errors of our age' (see p. 4, *infra*).

Another feature of Jesus' teachings on how to live is the fact that the instructions he gives us are usually non-prescriptive. He does not usually spell out the detail nor tell us what to do in black and white. Rather, he gives us guiding principles that we are to apply according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are to use our own judgment. Perhaps we would prefer that it would be more cut and dried, but Jesus is encouraging us to maturity as moral beings.

Jesus is instructing us as people on a journey, a journey towards perfection. We have not yet arrived, we are not yet perfect, but he is challenging us to take the next steps in following him towards the goal of becoming perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. He is prepared to be patient with us, as we are to be patient with others and with ourselves.

As we go to print with this issue of *Compass* we are entering into the season of Lent, a special time for repentance, for turning to God—a special time of challenge to us to follow Jesus' teachings on how to live.

As you take up this issue of *Compass* you may find that the first article, 'Our Great Love Story', leads us into the heart of Christian morality: the love of God for us and the response that love calls for.

—**Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.**

[Jean-Bertrand] Aristide's Christianity also tells us that Christ crucified is to be found among the poor and oppressed. This is the Christ who lies in the rubble alongside those who were crushed by falling buildings, who weeps alongside the man who lost his entire family, who aches alongside the women who endure the threat of rape every waking second of their existence. It is the Christ who commended the woman who anointed his feet as the first true believer, for she recognized the messiah in this peasant who was to be executed by the earthly powers that be.

—**David Schmidt, 'Making Sense of Hell on Earth', *National Catholic Reporter*, February 4, 2011**