

Cognitive dissonance

Psalm 73

This morning I am going to work on the Psalm.

It is a very challenging Psalm, isn't it? It raises again the classic challenge to our faith, '*why do bad things happen to good people?*' or, as here, '*why do good things happen to bad people?*'

When I read through this Psalm a couple of weeks ago I found it really hard to deal with, it is so challenging. So I raised this with the Men's Group to see if they could offer me some suggestions: but no, instead they challenged me to confront the difficult issues raised in this Psalm, face on, and wrestle with them and preach on what I uncovered.

So read and reflect I have. May God lead us to find something useful in what I have prepared!

The Psalm starts with a traditional pious saying:

*1 Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.*

This is a platitude is it not? But Asaph doubted the truth of this idea when faced with the realities of his world. So he begins the psalm by using this verse in a sarcastic way. He then goes on to describe the effect of his struggle when reflecting on the realities he describes in the psalm. Saying '*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.*'

Stumbling and slipping are expressions of doubt and despair. He almost fell off the foundation of his faith as he looked at the world. He almost denied the reality of a God whom he had thought was good and just. Why? What did he see in his world?

He saw the wicked living the good life. They had wealth, happiness, prosperity, joy, peace. Listen in part to how he describes them.

*5 They are not in trouble as others are
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.*

7 Their eyes swell out through fatness;

*their hearts overflow with follies.
8 They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.*

So Asaph doubts and we all know this feeling.

We have done our best to live good Christian lives but when our friends leave the faith, when our loved ones die, when God said, “No,” to our prayer for the thousandth time, when we suffer, when there are problems in the church, the floodgates of doubt are unleashed. We feel alone, miserable, like death itself. “What’s the point of it all?” We ask ourselves.

If it is any consolation, we are not alone feeling like this.

What are we to do when confronted with two apparent actualities that seem incompatible, two sets of facts or experiences that seem impossible to reconcile? In Asaph’s case, believing in the justice of God when faced with the blatant injustice present in so many ways in his world. Or, for us perhaps, believing in God’s kindness or fairness in our present world.

Scientists also find inconsistencies in apparent theories or facts a severe challenge. Why doesn’t the orbit of Mercury obey the rules of Newtonian physics like the other planets? And so on. It’s an itch that has to be scratched. As scientists or Christians, if we are satisfied with the accuracy of the facts, then there must be an issue with our assumptions. In the faith situation – perhaps one of our assumptions is wrong. Perhaps one we do not now we are even making. A challenging thought for the honest Christian!

The Dawkins and Hitchens and other atheists of this world would say ‘The answer is obvious! The whole idea of God is nonsense!’ I cannot accept this as I think there are many problems with their solution too!

Alternatively, we may consider the possibility that our assumptions about God’s intentions and way of working in the world are not adequate.

So, when faced with this misfit between his faith and the world, Asaph struggled as we do when confronted with these harsh realities. First, he wrestled with them with intellectual and emotional honesty. We see the result in verse 2, which read earlier and in verse 16.

*16. But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,*

He stepped back from both God and the world and tried to make sense of it all himself. Huge struggle – no success!

Finally in despair he tried another approach

17. '... I went into the sanctuary of God'; Asaph spent time in God's presence and came away seeing the world in quite a different way. That is what walking closer to God does. It shows us how the world really is. Genuine Christianity shows us the true basis of reality. So, like Asaph we need to get closer to God and then we see everything in its right proportions. And how does this happen? In Ephesians Paul explains how *'... to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'* And a little later: *'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, as we mature to the full measure of the stature of Christ'* [4: 13]

Ireneus in the 2nd century put it beautifully: *"The glory of God is a human being fully alive"*. He explained that God is glorified when people reach their full, vibrant potential through faith and participation in divine life. He emphasizes that true human flourishing—spiritually, intellectually, and physically—is a testimony to God's presence.

So the answer to our conundrum then lies in a fuller, ultimately complete participation in the divine life.

We each walk a long walk to God, don't we? As creatures that have begun as part of this world, we all live and all die, as do all living creatures. However there is a difference between us and the rest of creation; we understand and have experienced the reality of the knowledge of good and evil. More, we can choose, and we even understand that we do choose.

And we must choose, there is no neutral position, and then we must walk with the consequences. Will we follow in the way of the world, or in the way of Jesus? It is interesting that the first name used for Christianity was 'the Way'. Christians were called followers of the Way.

So, we will make sense of this world aright only when we are filled with all the fullness of God; when we reach our full, vibrant potential through faith and participation in divine life.

Or as Asaph puts it

23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

This life then is a time for becoming. I sometimes think it is like boot camp in the army. One comes in all unknowing and then the training program strikes. At the end of it we find ourselves to be very different from how we were when we started in every way. Perhaps life with all its highs and lows is our bootcamp on the way to the kingdom.

If we accept that the Holy Spirit is working with us to bring us to completeness in Christ, then every aspect of life is an opportunity to learn and grow. While they all can be used, reflection shows me that we can grow faster when in a challenging situation than when comfortable. It is easier to find the true centre of life when our illusions of life are eroded than when we can be comfortable in them.

Unfortunately, those who chose the way of the world are missing the opportunity at this time to grow towards participation in the divine life of completeness. We should feel real pain for them in what they are missing, not envy or anger.

Luckily to make this walk from our present condition we have scripture, the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the support and insights of our brothers and sister in Christ, and our life experience. The question facing each of us then is: 'Is the pattern of my life such as will lead me to this glorious result?' What should we repent, what should we change, what should we add, what should we strengthen, if we are to grow ourselves and support those around us to also grow?

Finally, we need to remember that what each of us will be in the kingdom will be different and each will flourish as their own true self. Physical beauty, intellectual capacity or spiritual insight will not be the measure. As Irenaeus said, people will reach their full, vibrant potential through faith and participation in divine life, whatever that might be like for each of us, and that will be enough.