

Column

A major roadblock to faith for many is the problem of pain and suffering. Some have gone so far as to say if there is a divine being, He must either be weak and thus unable to do anything about the mess of the world or a sadist who doesn't care and perhaps even enjoys looking on at man's plight at a safe distance.

What might a Christian's response be? Well, in beginning, we would have to concede that the world is a mess . . . there are more problems than solutions. It is indeed a place of beauty – in the words of Manley Hopkins, it “is charged with the grandeur of God”. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is a dark and dangerous place. War, acts of terrorism, sickness, and family violence are signs that all is not right.

In other words, Christians do not deny the reality of sin and evil in the world. Even so, they do not subscribe to either of the proposed theories I have just named. Instead they posit a third option. John McNeil illustrates this option beautifully in a one-act play entitled “The Long Silence”.

As the play opens, billions of people are gathered on a great plain before God's throne waiting for the Last Judgment. Some are shrinking in fear, but not all. All along the front line are groups of belligerent folk who are challenging God's right to judge.

“How can He know about suffering?” snapped a pert young brunette as she ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. “We endured terror, beating, torture and death!”

In another group, a Negro boy lowered his collar. “What about this?” he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. “Lynched for no crime – but being black.”

In yet another group, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes cried out: “Why should I suffer? It wasn't my fault.”

Across the plain there were many others. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he had permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, a place where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know about all that man had been forced to endure?

As the play moves forward, a leader from each group is chosen and sent to the centre of the plain. There is a Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a

deformed arthritic and a thalidomide child. Once assembled, they begin to present their case. Before God can qualify to be their judge, He must endure what they endured. So, they sentence Him to live upon earth – as a man! They cry out:

“Let Him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted. Give Him a work so difficult that even His family will think Him out of His mind when he tries to do it. Let Him be betrayed by His closest friends. Let Him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let Him be tortured. As the last, let Him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let Him die.”

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from those gathered on the plain. And when the last had finished, there was a long silence . . . for suddenly they all knew that God had already served His sentence.

O Lord God, whose blessed Son, our Saviour, gave his back to the smiters and hid not his face from shame; Grant us grace to take joyfully the sufferings of this present time, in full assurance of the glory that shall be revealed; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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