



40 Days of Lent

**DAILY
TV MASS**

ONLINE RETREAT

DAYS 23-28

Fr. Richard Leonard S.J.
Finding God in Suffering
Day 23

An Introduction- Where is God in suffering?

My interest in exploring where or how God can be found in human suffering started out of experience, of me grappling with a family tragedy which forced me to confront how I can hold on to my belief in a loving God in the face of evil.

On 23rd October 1988, my sister, Tracey, was involved in a freakish car accident, while her car was being towed, and she dislocated the 5th cervical vertebra and fractured the 6th and 7th vertebrae.

For the last 23 years, she has been a quadriplegic. Tracey is one of the finest people I know, and even at the time of the accident, at 28 years of age, she had already lived in Calcutta for three years and nursed the poorest of the poor at Mother Teresa's House of the Dying. Then she returned to Australia and got a job working with the Sisters of Our Lady of Sacred Heart in running a health centre for the Aboriginal people at Port Keats. It was near there that the car accident happened.

Within twelve hours of my mother finding out about Tracey's accident, she was standing in a hospital room in Darwin asking: "Where the hell is God?"

In the months that followed, I got some of the most appalling and frightening letters from some of the best Christians I knew. A few wrote, "Tracey must have done something to deeply offend God, so she had to be punished here on earth."

"Tracey's suffering is sending up glorious building blocks to heaven for her mansion there when she dies." This is what is usually called "pie in the sky when you die theology."

"Your family is really very blessed, because God only sends the biggest crosses to those who can bear them."

"It's all a mystery"; invoking Isaiah 55 with "My ways are not your ways"; and "Only in heaven will we find out God's plan."

There is a truth in each of these statements, but I thought that one of the points of the Incarnation is precisely that God wants to reveal his ways and thoughts, wants to be known, especially regarding the moments when we are sometimes given to the greatest despair. We do not believe and love an aloof being who revels in mystery and goes AWOL when the action turns tough in our lives. The Incarnation surely shows us that God is committed to being a participant in the human adventure in all its complexity and pain.

Over 30 years later, I am very grateful to the correspondents who wrote to me after my sister's accident. They have alerted me to how often we hear some terrible theology which does not draw people to God in the worst moments of our lives. It alienates us. It alienated me for a while from believing in a God who wants us to have an intelligent discussion about the complexities of where and how the Divine presence fits into our fragile and human world.

Over the next several days I will highlight my seven steps to spiritual sanity when we are tempted, and we give in to the temptation, to ask, "where the hell is God?"

Let us begin with a Question: What gave you consolation when you were hit with the "where the hell is God?" moment?

Part 1: God Does not send pain and suffering!

In offering anything on where God is in regard to our pain and suffering, we are squarely in the domain of speculative theology. Greater minds than mine over the centuries have applied themselves to these questions and have come to different conclusions about them. I am happy for that. The problem is that when I most needed their insights, I found their answers inadequate. I am not blaming them. Many of them did not have the benefit of contemporary biblical studies, theology, science, and psychology to lend a hand.

The Church knows, too, that it cannot be definitive about these matters, because on this side of the grave we just do not know where or how God fits in regard to the suffering of the world. Therefore, I make no greater claim for my ideas than that

they have helped me hold on to faith in a loving God as I walked through the “valley of tears” and in the “shadow of death”.

The first thing I have come to affirm is that God does not directly send pain, suffering, and disease. God does not punish us, at least not in this life. I hold this confidently because in 1 John 1:5 we are told that “God is light, in him there is no darkness,” so deadly and destructive things cannot be in the nature of and actions of God.

Secondly, whatever the varied images of God in the Old Testament, in Jesus God is revealed as being about life, not death, construction, not destruction, forgiveness, not retribution, healing, not pain. There is not a page of the New Testament upon which we can read about Jesus taking anything away from anyone. No one went to him with one bad leg and had to be carried away because he took out the other one for good measure. He may have even got justifiably angry with the money sellers in the temple where we are told he drove them out, but we are not told that he whipped them senseless. Jesus certainly confronted the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Teachers of the Law, but he was never vengeful. He did not have them rubbed out for their trouble. Not even the Romans, who were then the enemies of Israel, were treated with anything but respect, and one was even praised for his great faith. Even today, Christ confronts, challenges and tells us we must carry our cross and bear our burdens, but that is a vastly different thing from saying the Father, Son, and Spirit send the crosses to us and lay the burdens on us in the first place.

There is a huge difference between God permitting evil and God perpetrating such acts on us. We need to stare down those who promote and support an image of God as a tyrant. In its place, let us cling to God, in whom there is no darkness, made visible in Christ Jesus who subdues tyranny in all its forms and who not only accompanies us through pain, death, suffering, and disease but even seeks us out when we are most lost and guides us home.

Question: “Tell me your image of God and I will tell you your theology” (Marcus Borg). What is your image of God?

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Part 2: Easter Sunday: God's response to Good Friday

Following my sister Tracey's accident that left her a quadriplegic I was standing with my Mother in that hospital room, there was no way of knowing how much all our lives were about to change. Most of all, and most heartbreakingly, for my sister.

We do not need to blame God directly for causing our suffering in order to turn it around and harness it for good. The human search for meaning is a powerful instinct. Tracey's accident, however, was meaningless in itself. It was a random event, an intersection of the wrong time and the wrong place and the worst outcome. I say the worst outcome quite deliberately because on the day after the accident, when we arrived at the hospital, had the doctors said to us, "While you were flying up here your daughter and sister died of her injuries, but we want you to know that had she lived she would have been a quadriplegic," in such a scenario, we would have taken death as some sort of tragic comfort.

I have grown in unexpected ways through this family tragedy.

Mostly out of sheer boredom, two years after her accident, Tracey decided to write up the stories of her life in Calcutta. Only a mother could have stored away in the loft every single piece of air mail that Tracey wrote from India over the years. They became the basis upon which she dictated to a computer her book, *The Full Catastrophe*, regaling the reader with stories of her life in Calcutta and the Northern Territory. Its biggest impact has been on adventurous young people, would-be volunteers, and other paraplegics and quadriplegics – giving people hope.

So, in some measure, Tracey turned around a meaningless accident and was generous with what she still had left to offer – her story, humour, wisdom, and experience. Through God's grace, the rest of us have learnt a lot too, about the big

lessons regarding ourselves, one another, and the precariousness of life. But I have also learnt from this accident to be grateful when I bound up stairs two at a time, feed myself, stand in the shower unaided, or actually go to the toilet on my own. At these deeply ordinary human moments, I thank God, because I have discovered that even the lavatory can be a house of prayer.

One of the greatest learnings all my family has painfully acquired over this time is coping with the restrictions disabled people have to bear. I am the one who will confront you in the car park if I see you alight from an able-bodied car with no disability sticker when it is taking up the disability parking spot because it is the closest one to the shop.

The greatest gift this searing experience has given me, however, is to have greater empathy for anyone who is devastated in grief or who feels abandoned by life or God. I have touched that moment, and I have asked, on more than one occasion, “where the hell is God?” That has irrevocably changed my ministry as a priest for the better.

Given that, with God’s power and love, good can come out of disasters, this in no way changes the nature of the terrible event in the first place. It does not become God’s will because we have grown as a result of a shocking event.

I think spiritual sanity rests in seeing that every moment of every day, God does what he did on Good Friday, not to allow evil, death, and destruction to have the last word, but to ennoble humanity with an extraordinary resilience and, through the power of amazing grace, to enable us to make the most of even the worst situations and let light and life have the last word. Easter Sunday is God’s response to Good Friday: life out of death.

Question: When tough things have happened in your life, what life lessons emerged from them?

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Part 3: God does not send disasters!

In Australia, we are often in drought. Evil is a big word to describe the fallout from the drought, but only a person who has not been directly touched by it would think of it in any less dramatic terms.

My problem with the drought has been with the response of religious leaders to it. For years now, in almost every church in Australia, we have been “praying for rain”.

On one level, this is entirely appropriate, stating as it symbolically does, that God wants to enter every part of our lives and stands in solidarity with us in our joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. Even in a drought, God wants us to name what our needs are. These occasions are cries of the heart. They can be occasions for a liturgical lament, of a collective expression of communal pain. My worry arises because they are rarely couched in these terms, and they raise more questions about what role we think God is taking in the drought itself.

We cast God in the role of the great-meteorologist-in-the-sky all the time. Brides do this especially. I have lost count of how many brides, over whose wedding ceremonies I am presiding, have asked me to pray for a fine day. I think God has greater problems to worry about, at least I hope so.

I want to make it clear that I think we can and should pray about water, the earth, and the environment. I think that if we are truly pro-life, it is inescapable that we must be pro-planet as well. We might even have Masses where we ask for the grace to be the best stewards of creation that we can be, but this is a long way from the Mass for Rain. This raises another vital point: what do we think we are doing when we are praying?

I think a good number of Christians do not actually pray to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, but to Zeus. Life with Zeus was unpredictable. You had to stay on his good side through prayer, penance, fasting, and sacrifice. Is that starting to sound familiar?

We do not believe in the unpredictable Zeus. Christianity, however, believes our immutable or unchanging God is already on our side in and through Jesus Christ, and we are called to respond as fully as we can to such unearned and unwarranted compassionate love.

So, what does prayer do? Prayer asks an unchanging God to change me/us, to change the world so that we might more reflect his loving face and thereby transform the world.

So let us be careful to say what we mean; a saner theology that recognises that God is unchanging, knows our needs before we speak them, and delights that we are asking for his power to change the world. And may the people of God say, “Amen”.

Question: How do I think Christian prayer works? What am I expecting from my prayer?

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Part 4: Finding God's will for our Lives!

I want to get very clear. I believe passionately in the will of God. It is just that I believe it is discovered on the larger canvas rather than in the details. I think God is a big-picture-kind-of-guy. Let me explain.

I went through Catholic schools for all my education. We used to pray a lot about God's will. This was especially true when vocations directors turned up to ask us if we were being called to the priesthood or the religious life. At these times, some people would be praying fervently: "Please God, do not call me to be a priest." "Do not make me become a nun." "Do not send me off to be a brother."

The way God's call was presented to us was that firstly, God calls you and if you heard or felt that call, you had to respond, or else God would be very angry and you would be very unhappy because whatever you chose to do in life, it would not be what God primarily called you to do. In Catholic circles, this sort of thinking almost exclusively applied to vocations to ordained or professed ministry within the Church. Curiously, it never applied to the single or married vocation.

At a very deep level, you must want your vocation or it's null & void.

God's will is not in the specifics but in the most faithful, hopeful, and loving person we can be, as well as to embody in all we do the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

We can glimpse the establishment of the Reign of God in this world, as well as in the next, by creating a community where all people can realise their potential to

live lives worthy of their calling to be faithful, hopeful, and loving. There is not a heavenly blueprint, as such, for my life. Through the blessing of time and place, the gifts of nature and grace, I work with God to realise my potential in the greatest way possible, even if that involves having to do things that are difficult, demanding, and sacrificial. This response is not out of fear and compulsion but comes from love and desire.

The greatest test for the proponents of God's will as a blueprint for each individual life, and indeed for every living thing, is not found in most of our lives, but in the lives of the poorest of the poor. Whatever of my angst over what I might choose with God's grace to do with my life, what about a child who dies from malnutrition hours after being born? Or the twenty-eight-week-old foetus who in some countries can now be legally aborted? And the list could go on and on. Are any of these tragic situations God's active, specific will for these sisters and brothers of ours?

Given that faith, hope, and love mark out God's will in the big picture and that God and I must work out the details together, then the task of discernment comes into its own. Then we have to work with amazing grace to find God's will for me and all of creation.

Question: How does God's will work in my life? How do I discern my choices in the light of my faith?

Part 5: Why was Jesus killed?

“How Great Thou Art” is one of the most loved hymns in the English-speaking world. But every time we sing it, the third verse worries me:

When I think that God His Son not sparing

Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in.

That on the Cross my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin.

Why does this matter? Well, if we keep singing hymns like this, then some people may think it is true.

God’s will for Jesus affects everything about how we think God deals with us. If our God wants and sends suffering, even setting up a grisly death for His only beloved Son, then why should we complain when we get a disease, an illness, lose a child, or become a quadriplegic? We are getting off lightly in comparison to what some claim God wanted from Jesus.

For Christians, the paschal mystery – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – is the central paradigm around which our faith in God is constructed. It is the central story through which we explain our own origins, meaning and destiny.

God did not simply send Jesus “to die.” Rather, Jesus came to live. As a result of the courageous and radical way He lived His life, and the saving love He embodied for all humanity, He threatened the political, social, and religious authorities of His day so much that they executed Him. But God had the last word on the death of Jesus: Life, and life abundantly.

For most of Christian history, the question that has vexed many believers seems to be, “Why did Jesus die?” I think it is the wrong question. The right one is, “Why was Jesus killed?” And that puts the last days of Jesus’ suffering and death in an entirely new perspective.

This is how we can stand before the cross and listen to Jesus in John’s Gospel say, “I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.” This life is not about the perfect Son of the perfect Father making the perfect sacrifice to get us back in

God's good books, and thereby saving us. It is the Trinity's inner life overflowing to the world in Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Our God does not deal in death, but life. Everything in the New Testament shows this, even the grand apocalyptic narratives about the end of time, which show all the hallmarks of an inspired rabbinic teacher drawing big strokes on the largest of canvases. Jesus did not intend us to take this imagery literally. I assume the experience of judgment will not actually be a livestock gathering of sheep and goats as highlighted in Matthew 25. The lesson behind the imagery, however, is a real one for us to learn. God's compassion and love will ultimately see that justice is done. He will hear the cry of the poor and we will be called to account in the next life for what we have done and what we have failed to do in this life.

Question: How does Jesus' life, death and resurrection set a pattern for your Christian life? Why do you think Jesus died?

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Day 27

Part 6: Be the Miracle!

Every time there is another famine in the world, someone says, “How could God let that happen?” Sometimes we may think like this too. The statistics on starvation are frightening. UNICEF says 16,000 children die each day from starvation. We have enough food in our world to feed every person on this planet. We choose not to. Not you and me personally, but as wealthy blocs we do.

God becomes a convenient whipping boy at this point, but the ball is squarely in our court. In a world where all people could be fed, why do people starve? We choose it to be this way. The same is true of other examples as well: environmental degradation, personal and social stress, and lack of action to end war. We choose the world to be like this, and then blame God for the negative fallout from our decisions.

Of course, in our Christian tradition we have regular reminders of our obligations to God’s poor, of giving to charity, and at the very least, to be mindful of those who go without and resolve to change the world. That’s what grace before meals is all about.

It remains true that God must take some responsibility for the world in which we live. He permits evil things to take place. As I have said earlier, I am not given much to speculation about whether this is the best possible world or not. It is the world we have and so I accept it as the place wherein we exercise our free will, as the best one we can have. Even though it will never be perfect, and therefore heaven, by virtue of our choices we can improve it, or leave it impoverished.

And let's think about miracles. That they occur seems to me to be beyond dispute, especially in the realm of physical, emotional or spiritual healing. In classic Christian dogma, the believer is required to affirm that miracles happen, and that the author of the miracle is God. I can do both easily. I do not, however, have any concept of God "zapping" people with miraculous power. Such an idea can reduce God to a magician, gaining the admiration of the spell-bound audience who long to see His next amazing trick.

One of the many problems with this model is that the most deserving people I know, like my disabled sister, never seem to be called up on the celestial stage. I also reject this "magic model" because I cannot find it in the actions of Jesus. "Sign faith" in John's Gospel was considered the weakest faith of all. If miracles were simply a question of God's power, then how come Jesus could not perform miracles always and everywhere? The Gospel writers often put it down to a "lack of faith," which already allows for other preconditions for a miracle to occur. I think miracles occur when some of these healing assets are released by the brain into the body. For some, the reception of the Anointing of the Sick and the laying on of hands unlocks these properties. For others, it may be a pilgrimage to a holy place, personal prayer or intercessory prayer, devotion to a Saint, or for other more secular people I know who have experienced a miracle, it was a complete change in lifestyle, diet, and the practice of meditation.

In the 2003 movie *Bruce Almighty*, God tells the title character Bruce Nolan that if, "You want to see a miracle, son? Be the miracle."

Question- How do I think miracles work? Do I see my compassion for the earth and for God's poor as God's work in the world?

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Day 28

Part 7: God does not kill us off!

As Catholics, thank God, at least since the 1960s, we do not officially take the scriptures literally. We are not biblically fundamentalist. That is, until we seem to go near texts about God knowing the “hairs on our head” and the “span of our days.”

When I go near a nursing home, I am regularly asked, “Father, why won’t God take Grandma?” To which I reply, “Because Grandma won’t stop breathing yet.” I do not actually say this. I have more pastoral sense than that, but I want to. Using the cricket or baseball metaphor, we can say, “Well, Gran has had a good innings.” This works well enough when the person who has died is at an advanced age. The same line and its grateful sense break down completely when I am with parents who have just lost a child at any age, but especially at a stillbirth or when a child dies during its infancy. No parent should ever have to bury their child.

For the record, God does not need angels in heaven. In theology, we say that God is sufficient. God does not need anything, and therefore He has no need to take our children from us in any way, shape or form, angelic or otherwise.

What is exciting about Christian faith is that we believe God wants us. That is why humanity was created.

I think it is entirely appropriate to believe that life, from the womb to the nursing home, is not allotted a span, as such, by God, but that our body will live until it can no longer function, for whatever natural or accidental reason. God is not an active player in this process, but, again, must take responsibility for making us mortal. In

classical theology, the other alternative would have been for us to have been created a disembodied spirit, or an angel. But then I would not be me.

This is why I think when our body dies, our soul or spirit begins its final journey home. It is worth pausing here to reflect on what part of us might make this journey, what survives us through death. Clearly, if we cannot be certain about where God fits into a sometimes-evil world, then the nature of the soul is also the stuff of speculation.

I have been struck in recent years, however, that while the spiritual conception of a soul and its use in our religious language has waned, the word “soul” persists in ordinary conversation. Many non-religious people use this most religious of terms to describe another person. We often hear how others are lonely, distressed, or lost souls. It can be said that someone has a “beautiful soul” or that a piece of music, a painting, or other work of art “stirred my soul.” We describe mellow jazz as “soulful” and still alert others to distress by an SOS, “save our souls.”

These uses of the word reinforce St Thomas Aquinas’ teaching that the soul makes us human and sets us apart from other animals. Nearly all the great religions of the world believe in a soul, or its equivalent — something that survives the annihilation of the body in death.

I have come to the opinion that whatever else might characterize the soul, memory is an integral part of it. Our purified memories survive us.

Memory as a constitutive element within my soul means that when I meet God face to face, I will remember who I am and how I lived, and God will remember me. It is also a comfort for us to think that we may be reunited with those we have loved who have died before us, because we remember each other.

This is why I do not believe that God kills us off, but that as painful as death is, we know that we will see our brother or sister again, and that Christian hope says that our parting is not a definitive “goodbye,” but more a “see you later.”

Thank you for joining me over these past several days of the Daily TV Mass community’s 40 Days of Lent Retreat. As your Lenten journey continues, my prayer for you is that you find time for additional reflection as you get ready for the events of Holy Week especially for the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord on Easter Sunday.

Until then I leave you with these questions to ponder:

Question: What do I think happens to us after we die? What would I hope for?