

Good evening.

As will become screamingly apparent in the next few minutes this is the first time I have ever attempted to preach. And I think I can already say it is probably going to be the last. So let's all just sit back and enjoy this special and unique occasion.

It's hilarious to be here. This is the first time I've ever been to a college chapel service and I appear to be preaching. On Suffering. No less. Why does God allow suffering.

Why? Why?? In 12 minutes. No pressure. When I was at New College I was a pretty enthusiastic atheist. I tell you that to encourage any of you who feel you get 'disrespect' from other students about their faith. You may well have the last laugh. Perhaps they too will end up preaching here on something really difficult. God may allow suffering, but he clearly has a sense of humour.

So why does God allow suffering?

The answer is....

Um.

I don't know.

So. Let us pray.

Joking. But let us.

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Weirdly, I've been asked this question a lot recently. It's obviously a question many people think best answered by a bit part sitcom actress in her early forties. For some reason.

As Hume put it in 1776: 'Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?'. In other words people argue that God is either not all good or not all powerful and say that either way he cannot be the God of the Bible. Throwing this dilemma out to a group of Christians is like throwing a ball of wool into a basket of kittens, only a lot less winning. It's so hard to resist saying something, anything when the question itself poses such a formidable problem for Christianity (C.S. Lewis though it the best argument against) and when there are so many fantastic answers to choose from

Answers like 'we may as well ask ourselves why do *we* allow suffering – if 80% of war casualties are now civilians and 30-50% of the world's food now ends up in landfill giving off methane and the world's richest 1% own 40% of the wealth'. Why blame God?' or 'it's all about free will' or 'it's soul-making – if there were no danger there would be no bravery, no suffering, no need for kindness, besides to those willing to learn, pain can be an excellent teacher'.

But the truth is that we don't know why God allows suffering. I don't have the mind of God, 20 years in comedy, 8 years of small kids, my mind resembles a really old balloon forgotten in a ceiling corner of a pub a year after a party – old and dusty and can you say flaccid in a chapel? How can I with my wizened balloon brain hope to understand and why even bother? Even Megan with her Chris Hoy brain might find

the task beyond her.

To the world this sounds like a cop out. To us this sounds like a cop out. After the Haiti earthquake in which hundreds of thousands of people died and many more made homeless Archbishop John Sentamu said only, **“I have nothing to say that makes sense of this horror - all I know is that the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus is that he is with us”**. I’m sure I was not alone in wishing he had had something that sounded less like a defeat to offer up to the world’s accusing media. I hate not having answers, being out of control, seeming stupid. I hate people thinking badly of me and badly of my God.

Besides, if there are to be no answers why ask the question?

It strikes me that we arrive at the asking of this question for broadly two reasons – out of intellectual curiosity or in a howl of pain. Why does God allow this to happen to ME?

The wise do well not to confuse the two, though it’s not always easy. The howl of pain and intellectual argument are not always, especially in a place like this, easy to tell apart. A philosopher’s pain might look like mental gymnastics, creative writing on suffering might sound like a cry of pain. The thing is, what the questioner requires of you in both situations is very different.

Although I have some sympathy with the idea that much theology leads us away from Christ not towards him I am decidedly FOR deep thought on the mysteries of faith. Intelligence is a very great gift, the exercise of it a very great blessing.

The Franciscan monk Richard Rohr writes ...

“I don’t think the important thing is to be certain about answers nearly as much as being serious about the questions.” Deep thought on moral matters, developing a personal “beneath” that enables you to stand apart from, perhaps against contemporary culture, or even direct it yourself is crucial. The philosopher Hannah Arendt proposes that active thinking might even be a morally improving end in itself.

[Attending the trial of Adolph Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, in Jerusalem, Arendt noticed that Eichmann’s most notable characteristic was not ideological conviction, nor was it evil motivation, but thoughtlessness. In the Israeli court he functioned, as he had done in Germany, by sticking to the clichéd, conventional language that protects against reality and renders thinking unnecessary. Arendt’s conclusion ‘Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever comes to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?]

The writer Primo Levi noticed that the one characteristic the concentration camp survivors had in common was their intellectual curiosity.

So I urge you to grapple with these questions for the rest of your lives. Understand that in the topsy-turvy topology of the Kingdom of God spiritual truths often come in paradoxes. Don’t settle for easy, got it off of Google, answers.

Richard Rohr again “When we hold spiritual questions we meet and reckon with our own contradictions and dilemmas and we invariably arrive at a turning point where we either evade God or meet Him. Mere answers close down the necessary struggle too quickly, too glibly and too easily.”
The church desperately needs thinkers.

However.

This creative thinking should rarely be done in the presence of the suffering. Especially if either party has been drinking.

The thing is pain gets us all in the end. And the last thing you need is theology when you are hurting.

When our son Olly was born with Down Syndrome eight years ago we received a lot of letters from people, kind people, wanting to make it better. It became a joke to us that so many of these letters opened with the phrase ‘I know nothing I can say can make things any better’ and then they would go on for three pages, saying things. Trying to explain. Our feeling was that we would’ve preferred them to skip the explanations of why everything was going to be alright, or how we were special people God had specially selected for this difficult path, or how God only gave us things we could handle or how pain was purifying. Pain isolates. As I tried to feed my totally floppy baby I felt unloved, betrayed and abandoned by God. I had prayed for a healthy baby and God if he existed had forgotten or had said ‘no’. Olly not only had Down Syndrome, but a hole in the heart, gut problems, feeding problems, breathing problems and hearing problems. We spent much of the first year in hospital. I had somehow thought that I had a sort of Mafia deal with God. I would pray and attend church and on occasion help out a soup kitchen and in return He would shine His light on me and protect me from all misfortune. The truth, of course, is rather closer to the opposite.

So if you are asking because you or those you love are in pain, what I have been wondering can I say to you, frustrated as you probably are by the silent sky, by the lack or proliferation of answers, lonely, tired from having to endure?

One of the things it is most natural to do is to turn away from God.
I advise you not to. That’s what I did. It was a mistake.

Eighteen months after Olly's birth and a catalogue of further misfortunes had pushed me, if not over the edge, very near to it. Trying to pray, to engage with an All-Powerful I who had allowed, even planned, even made these things happen was becoming unbearable. I had sent the Almighty to Coventry. One day I got as far as silently shouting, ‘What are you doing to me?!’. I heard. Or understood. Or perhaps just imagined the whisper “I’m bringing you to your knees”. Of course in worldly terms this means “I’m destroying you”. From God it means “I just want to talk to you”.

I didn't take this well. I certainly didn't try and reboot my prayer life. Instead I decided that I was unimpressed by God's general modus operandi and to thenceforth and until further notice stop believing in him. Which made perfect sense at the time.

Initially returning to atheism was a massive relief. No more guilt at not reading the Bible or managing to pray. No more paedophile, homophobic, fundamentalist shame. I am not one of them, I am no longer implicated in the idiocy. I too, am perhaps intelligente. Like Richard Dawkins. But without Christ I was returned to a life that had got a lot harder all of a sudden and I was now all alone.

Some reasons not to turn away from Christ when you are suffering.

In Christ you will find companionship, hope and He will uncover for you 'the treasures of the darkness, the riches of the secret places.

Companionship.

We don't know why God chose suffering as the route to freedom but He did. The Bible, God's word is written from the viewpoint of the suffering for the suffering. The Messiah, says Isaiah, is 'a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering'. We are nearly always closer to Jesus in our trials and tribulations than we are when things are going well. Look for Him. He is near. Our Lord knows, He has experienced it, He loves us, and He suffers with us. Notice in the John 11 reading that Jesus weeps, that He is deeply moved *even though* He knows that Lazarus will walk out of the tomb in a few moments time. He is not weeping at Lazarus' death but at Mary and Martha's pain. Mary and Martha who both blame Him for their brother's death "If you had been here, Lord, our brother would not have died".

Hope

Why did Jesus come?

Isaiah 61:

The Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

Jesus came to transform suffering. God uses all things for the good of those who love Him. All things. God's healing, God's release, God's comfort, God's crown of beauty, the oil of gladness, these are great gifts. Come to Him.

The Treasures of the Darkness

We have found many blessings in our darkest times. If you can face up to the pain (and God can give you the strength to do that) here are treasures to be had. The treasures of the darkness, the riches of the secret places.

Gratitude and Joy.

On a personal note - I've spoken about Olly - the blessings of his presence in our lives have been manifold. He is ok not all the time, but very often the incarnation of joy.

Revelation.

Spiritual truths so often come in paradoxes. Death and Resurrection. Spirit and Body. Abundance and Destitution. Sorrow and comfort. The now and the hereafter. We so often place one aspect of the gospel over the other - we concentrate on the

resurrection at the cost of the cross. Perhaps only when we are suffering do we get anywhere near a proper understanding, perhaps only then do we manage to see the substance and the spirit of the Good News as they are – utterly entwined.

Love and community.

Faith is lived in family and community and God is experienced in family and community. We need each other to be God's presence. Suffering isolates us. Loving presence brings us back, makes us belong. We are mortal. We will suffer and die. But how we are with each other in that suffering and dying makes all the difference as to whether God's presence is felt or not and whether we are comforted or not.

When you suffer you become part of the community of the suffering, which is let's be honest the majority of the world. And when we look beyond our own troubles, and praise God anyway, I think it brings both Him and us a very special kind of joy.

I've rambled and shambled on enough. I want to leave you with Jesus' own words "in this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world"