

**When it all goes wrong**

*Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4*

Who do you turn to when it all goes wrong? Where do you go when it all goes wrong? What do you do when it all goes wrong?

One of the many challenges to faith and belief in our world today, a world so accustomed to be able to fix everything, is knowing how to deal with the bad news when it comes, or when the innocent suffer, or when tragedy strikes. How should we cope when bad things happen to good people? Is it possible, in the dark times, to hold on to what we believe with all the questions that come?

The diagnosis of cancer that came out of the blue.

The job offer that never arrived.

The relationship that crumbled around you without you noticing things were wrong until too late.

The child that died.

The tsunami and earthquake that swept away the lives of hundreds.

Financial ruin when investments failed.

The realisation that you have left love too late.

The argument that got out of hand that ended a long-standing friendship.

The gnawing doubt not deal with that ate your faith from the inside until only a brittle shell was left.

What happens when it all goes wrong, and you feel you can't move forward, can't go back and can't bear where life has left you? What happens when the soft answers, the tried-and-tested answers, the pious platitudes just won't do and you're left seething and raging against the people who have let you down or done you harm; or you are left shaking with impotent fury at the situation over which you have no control; or you cry out in pain and disbelief against the God Who you believe has abandoned you.

I was in Germany in October last year attending the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Reformation in Wittenberg and I stayed in Berlin. One afternoon I went to the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, a few miles outside the city.

Sachsenhausen is not a place where anyone can walk quickly. Like all concentration camps, it is a place where things for humanity went as wrong as they could go. The weight of memory, savagery, inhumanity and bleakness lies heavily there, as I know it does on other concentration camps. It is a place where birds rarely sing, though one small flock of sparrows flew through the leaden grey skies, piercing the clouds of drizzle that enveloped the site with the brevity of life.

I had never visited the site of a concentration camp before. Sachsenhausen housed Jews, political prisoners, religious prisoners, prisoners of war and many others. Good people, bad people, ordinary people. I walked on the cobbles made by prisoners. I saw images painted on the walls of the prisoners' kitchens; I saw the triangles made for Jewish, gypsy, political and homosexual prisoners; I saw the shoes, and the shoe-testing tracks where prisoners were made to run to test whether shoes would be good enough for use by German soldiers; I saw the execution trench where conscientious objectors were sentenced to death by Nazi Special Courts; I saw the site of the crematorium; I saw the mass graves of concentration camp victims, dying from cold, hunger, neglect and torture; I stood on the site of gallows where prisoners were executed in front of their assembled fellow-prisoners as an example, the same site where at Christmas, the SS had a Christmas tree erected.

Sachsenhausen is not a place where anyone can walk quickly. It is a place where things went wrong for humanity.

It is a place that overwhelms, where the planned banality of cruelty was commonplace and everyday, and unimaginable inhumanity was unexceptional. Words cannot quantify or delineate this place of broken and misshapen human desolation.

In the face of the eternal 'why' which concentration camps shout to the heavens, one is left with the endless 'why not' when we see ongoing inhumanity and casual dismissal of human pain, need and hurt. Things go wrong, and Sachsenhausen is an emblem of that wrongness.

Faith is no trivial thing in this bitter footprint where humanity went wrong. As I stood in that place where history was hollowed of hope, I remembered the story of the Book of Job. It wrestles with these very real human problems, and does not give easy answers. In fact, Job was written to challenge easy answers to the hard questions of pain and unjustified suffering. But it also articulates clearly that such struggles, such wrestling, belong before God.

One of the important things the faith community that is the Church must provide is the creation of a safe space for people to wrestle with God. Faith is not easy. Faith is about grappling with the difficult things of life and not letting go.

The Church ought to be a place for people to ask disturbing questions, particularly in those times in life when things go wrong. We need to be with people when God feels most absent. In the moment of failure, or grief, or anger, the challenge for us is to be present.

As we gather at this communion table, a sign of brokenness since shortly after the meal shared, all the disciples abandoned Jesus, there will be people here today, or will know of people at home, or amongst friends, colleagues or neighbours, who are struggling because things have gone wrong. People who are angry at the unfairness of things; people who are angry at being let down, or ignored, or treated badly in reality or in perception; people who feel they don't fit, or they don't know what to do next; people who are wondering if they've made a big mistake; people who can't let go a painful past; people who are bowing their heads now for fear that someone looks them in the eye and sees the hurt, or the shame, or the embarrassment, or the doubt.

Job sat among the ashes, having done nothing wrong. Bad things happened to a good person. He sat there, with his 'why me?' questions, and wrestled with God. I wonder if he came to the conclusion, 'why not me?' But Job waited, and engaged with God, and did not let go. The God Who seemed so absent, so uncaring, so indifferent, was sitting in the ashes with Job too, waiting in the silence.

What happens to our faith when it all goes wrong for us in life? What happens when we don't get the answers to the questions we ask? God has not caused the suffering, but God sits

alongside the sufferers. God is in the brokenness, saying to any who will listen, “I am still here. I am still here.”

When things go wrong, we can’t always fix things. But we can accompany, and listen, and wait. And maybe, just maybe, in the accompanying and the listening and the waiting, we might find God no longer absent, but very, very present.

The Israeli violinist Yitzhak Perlman contracted polio at the age of 4. Ever since, he has had to wear metal braces on his legs and walk with crutches, yet he became one of the great virtuosos of our time. On one occasion, the story is told, he came out onto the stage at a concert to play a violin concerto. Laying down his crutches, he placed the violin under his chin and began tuning the instrument when, with an audible crack, one of the strings broke. The audience were expecting him to send for another string, but instead he signalled the conductor to begin, and he proceeded to play the concerto entirely on three strings. At the end of the performance the audience gave him a standing ovation and called on him to speak. What he said, so the story goes, was this: *‘Our task is to make music with what remains.’*<sup>i</sup> Faith is the refusal to let go, even when things go wrong.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p222