

It's (Not) God's Will

The question of why people suffer has, in light of belief in a loving God, puzzled writers and philosophers over the ages and so it's unlikely I'm going to resolve the puzzle! People's response to illness, loss, suffering or death, will typically be: "It's God's will", but I don't agree and I would like to explain why. These will be basically my own thoughts, though influenced over the years by many sources including Rabbi Harold Kushner's bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which put a number of things into focus for me. I must particularly credit his chapter "God leaves us room to be human" - shared thoughts with which I begin.

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve tells, in allegorical form, of the perfect relationship God had intended should exist between himself and the man and woman whom he brought into being out of love and so as to share with them his gift of creation. Sadly, indeed tragically, they listened to a voice that spoke to them more loudly than God's voice and as a result made a choice against his will for them and so introduced sin and its consequences into the perfection of God's creation with the result that things were no longer as he had intended. Couldn't God have put things right again? Well, yes he could of course, but this leads us on to our next consideration.

One of God's greatest gifts to us is that of free will; in a sense it is the ultimate gift of love because, in leaving us absolutely free in our choices, God takes the risk that we will choose against him – which is what sin is all about. He could force himself and his will on us, but what sort of love would that be? He could also keep us from harm and danger and the imperfections of life – one of which is suffering – but, again, that would mean taking away some of our freedoms, especially our freedom of choice. Imagine, for example, if a parent wished to keep their child absolutely 100% safe and sound and never wanted them to be exposed to any form of harm or risk or illness or disease. The only way to do that would be to wrap them up in cotton wool and keep them locked in a padded room, but what sort of love would that be? It's the same with God. As much as he would love to keep us safe and sound, free from all harm and suffering, he can't without taking from us his ultimate gift – our freedom.

And so, in terms of creation, it's as if God has set a huge ball in motion and now, as a result of the freedom that he has imbued into creation, he can no longer stop that ball from rolling. He could, of course, because he is God, but (with occasional well-documented exceptions for exceptional reasons: the parting of the Red Sea, the raising of Lazarus, and so on) he chooses not to because, if he did, if he kept interfering in our lives like that, it would also interfere with, and negate, his gift of freedom (if we pray for rain for the garden,

what about the people next door who are planning a barbeque?). In the same way good and loving parents have to let their child loose in the world (after teaching them about good and bad and how to look after themselves) so leaving them free to learn by experience. It is a hard thing to do (like that first day at the school gates) but it's part of being a parent. God does his best for us, providing us with a guardian angel and the help of his word, his grace and his sacraments, but basically he chooses to let us be, free to make our own choices.

So now back to Rabbi Kushner and a few direct quotes from his book:

Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the universe? Why must everything happen for a specific reason? Why can't we let the universe have a few rough edges?

Suppose that Creation, the process of replacing chaos with order, were still going on [*my comment: indeed creation is on-going, God continues to create*]. In the biblical metaphor of the six days of Creation... suppose God didn't quite finish by closing time on the afternoon of the sixth day? The world is mostly an orderly, predictable place, showing ample evidence of God's thoroughness and handiwork, but pockets of chaos remain. Things happen which could just as easily have happened differently. It may yet come to pass that, as "Friday afternoon" of the world's evolution ticks toward the Great Sabbath which is the End of Days, the impact of (this randomness) will be diminished.

Or it may be that God finished His work of creating eons ago, and left the rest to us. Residual chaos, chance and mischance, things happening for no reason, will continue to be with us, what Milton Steinberg has called "the still un-removed scaffolding of the edifice of God's creativity." In that case, we simply have to learn to live with it, sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident, like the murder and the robbery, are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of His will, and which angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us.

Because it is the central component of my theory, I would pick up on Rabbi Kushner's opinion (also) that pain, suffering and death are not the will of God. It's very easy to lay that trip on God when bad things happen that make no sense to us; it's almost as if we have to blame someone and when there is no one else and no other immediate explanation, we blame God or we implicate him. But surely we have to ask ourselves what sort of God we believe in that we think wills pain and suffering, death and destruction? It would be a very vengeful and vindictive image of God, one more fitting to more culturally limited Old Testament theology than to the New Testament revelation of a God who has come to us to redeem and save us in and through the person of his Son.

For the same reasons illness and suffering aren't personal punishment meted out by God – new born babies get sick and they haven't done anything.

Things happen in life that we struggle to understand, and the more evil or destructive they are the more we struggle – but they are not God's will, they are life, they are bound up in the mystery of that interplay between freedom in creation and the imperfection introduced into it by sin. Very often things are the direct or indirect result of mankind's choices and actions and so the fault is ours. At other times things happen simply because that's life, that's how it is - it's not how it was meant to be, but it's how it is. At such times when things don't make any sense, the one thing, the one consistent reality, we can be sure of is God. God doesn't will the pain and suffering and disaster, but he is there to help us cope with it and get through it. And as difficult as that experience may sometimes be, how much more might it be if he wasn't? – a question we don't always ask.

We might be wondering, at this point, that if God doesn't will pain and suffering, how can Jesus say: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him take up his cross and follow me”? [Mt 16 v 24] It's a good question. I don't think Jesus may have necessarily (or exclusively) meant taking up the cross of suffering as he did, but rather being willing to accept whatever we might be called to do in service of the gospel and his kingdom especially in terms of self-sacrifice, selflessness, service of others, and so on – “crosses” in that sense. Sometimes, however, the cross we are asked to bear might be that of suffering, but the implication isn't that God wills it or sends it, but that if and when it comes our way we try to make an otherwise negative situation a more positive one by offering it in union with Our Lord's cross.

The catechism says (talking about the Sacrament of the Sick):

The sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting themselves more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way they are consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Saviour's redemptive Passion.

Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.¹

While Our Lord's suffering and death took place at a given point in time and history, its effects were for all time and therefore, as long as there is sin in the world, his redemptive work is on-going and in that sense “available” for us to become involved in, uniting our sufferings to his “for the good of all people for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father.”²

Even if we accept that suffering is not from God but is part of life (as a consequence of original sin), personally faced with pain or suffering or loss we

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1521
² “ “ “ , para 1522

may still find ourselves asking (God) “Why me?” Unless it’s the result of something we have done (for example being diagnosed with cancer after a lifetime of smoking), then there is no satisfactory answer to the question other than perhaps its reverse: “Why *not* me?” Job³ asks: “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” [2 v10] Even if we don’t believe that sorrow comes from God, it’s still a good question in the sense that we can sometimes take God’s providence for granted, never asking why we are as richly blessed as we may be or at least not as readily as we may question (and blame God for) bad things happening to us. And speaking of asking...

Where does the power of prayer fit into my “rolling ball” theory? Not only does God ask for our prayers, but we believe he hears and answers them according to what he knows to be best. If his answer isn’t going to adversely affect someone else’s life and freedom, then we hope our prayers receive a favourable hearing. It may be something as inconsequential as getting a fine day for a picnic (but I don’t think it works for who wins a cup final!), or as profound as God giving a sick person encouragement and strength and even healing. We don’t always know *how* our prayers are answered, only that they are and that’s where we have to place our hope and trust.

And this leads to a final thought and to state again something we said earlier. Rabbi Kushner:

When we try to deal with such a burden, we begin to wonder how we will ever make it through. But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside of ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on.

God doesn’t will sickness, suffering, or death, but he is there to help us cope with them and with anything else life may bring our way, and, with time, we will see how much better we coped because he was.

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³ whose story Kushner discusses at length