

Session 1: The symptoms of life

Recently, that bastion of the British media, Stephen Fry, was interviewed by a similar bastion of the Irish media, Gay Byrne. The interviewer, knowing his subject is a (devout) atheist, asked him what he would say to God if he did happen to be greeted, rather surprisingly for Fry, at the Pearly Gates. The reply, vehement and echoing the voices of many past and present, said:

“I think I’d say, ‘bone cancer in children? What’s that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It’s not right. Its utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid god who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?’ That’s what I’d say.”

Video clip: Stephen Fry being interviewed by Gay Byrne.

Exercise: with the people around you, spend a few minutes discussing how that statement. Don’t seek to explain it away or argue with it. How does it make you feel to hear that? What questions does it raise for you about the faith we say we share?

Whether Fry is right to rail against God is something to look at later. For now, let us stick with the experience of life. The American Poet, Mary Oliver, looks at life through the filter of nature itself:

**Every year
everything
I have ever learned
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss** (*In Blackwater Woods, Mary Oliver*)

Think for a moment about the cycle of nature: spring, summer, autumn, winter. Birth, growth, decay, death/rest. Repeat. What difficulties do we encounter as a result of such cycle of life? What benefits does it bring to both human life and the natural order?

John Keats suggested that this pattern is something we see not simply in the physical processes but in the how we human beings engage with ourselves throughout the course of our lives:

**Four Seasons fill the measure of the year;
There are four seasons in the mind of man:
He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
Takes in all beauty with an easy span:
He has his Summer, when luxuriously
Spring’s honied cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming high
Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness—to let fair things
Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
Or else he would forego his mortal nature.** (*The Human Seasons, John Keats*)

Reading: Genesis 3:1-13, 22

Exercise: with the people around you, talk about how this story encourages us to engage with the reality of self-reflection (knowledge of good and evil). Is it all 'bad'? Are there positives that arise out of the experience? How does this 'eating of the fruit' differentiate between ourselves and the other animals in the garden - do Oliver and Keats offer us a clue as to the difference?

St. Irenaeus, one of the early Church Fathers, suggested that Adam and Eve should be seen as children grasping for something they aren't yet ready for but that it is our destiny to have - full understanding and awareness.

My cats know pain. All of them have experienced illness at some point or another. If it's not illness then it's the fear and uncertainty that a trip to the vets for a booster brings! When the illness passes they think no more of it. Before it comes they won't anticipate it (as far as we are aware).

Humans, experience things differently. We can anticipate, dwell on, dread, hope. Joys and pains become something we can know in advance of, or in reflection upon, the fact of an event itself.

Is human (primate?) suffering, then, different to the suffering of other animals on Planet Earth?

Teachers from various traditions suggest that this particular way of engaging with pain and suffering is, at least in part, what we loosely term 'the human condition':

[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (*Jesus, Gospel according to Matthew 5:45*)

All life is dukkha (dissatisfaction) (*Buddha, The First Noble Truth*)

Unto whom should I tie up and give the bundle of my pains? The whole world is overflowing with pain and suffering... (*Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikh Faith*)

Given that Buddhists and Jains take an agnostic or atheistic stance it could be that what is common to all religion is not belief in God but rather our reflection on the experience of life as being not as we want or hope for - dukkha as Buddhists call it. From a Christian perspective that theologians call Redemption History is the journey with God in responding to this dissatisfied experience of life.

Exercise: Discuss with those around you: is it just the obvious examples of pain that can be said to cause us dissatisfaction? Are there instances where the joys of life could also be said to be unsatisfactory?

Take home exercise: before the next session, spend a few minutes reflecting back on the week. Look at the joys and the pains, the highs and the lows. What effect did each have on you? Were there times when things you'd normally be joyous about didn't really touch you? Were there times when things that could normally be brushed off really got to you? Think about why this might be