

In the midst of all the excitement of the Rugby World Cup, last weekend was marked by two tragedies that have left their mark on this country this week. First there was that tragic fire in the halting site in Carrickmines in which five adults and five children lost their lives. Then there was the killing of a young Garda officer as he sought to secure the safety of a young woman in a situation of domestic violence, leaving behind a young wife and small children.

What do you say to people who have suffered such tragic loss? What does our faith have to say in such situations? Where is God? Where is God when it hurts? That is one of the questions that lies behind the book Job that our Old Testament Lesson is drawn from, that we would have read from last Sunday if it had not been our Harvest Thanksgiving. It is a story of a man facing unjust suffering – running through this whole book is a search for meaning, why is this happening, where is God. At its heart is a series of dialogues between Job and friends who have come to comfort him, to help him understand what is happening to him. All this is of no help to Job – they cannot answer his basic quest for meaning, where is God in all this.

As I thought on this, my mind turned to one of the stories that came out of the Holocaust. It is told by Elie Wiesel. He recalled a time when the inmates of the camp were forced to watch the hanging of a young Jewish boy.

Just before the hanging, Elie heard someone standing behind him ask; ‘Where is God? Where is he?’ The prisoners were forced to watch the hanging and then were marched past the gallows on which the young boy was hanging. Behind him, Elie heard the same voice ask, ‘Where is God now?’ Wiesel writes: ‘And I heard a voice within me, answer him, ‘Where is he? Here he is – he is hanging here on this gallows.’

There is a profound truth in that remark, that cuts through all those awful platitudes that are often offered to those facing great suffering – its all in his plan; God must love them very much to spare them any more pain on earth. I think back on the father of a young man who had committed suicide telling me of a neighbour who he hardly knew, coming across to him and simply taking him by the hand and saying ‘I’m hurting for you.’. He wasn’t offering explanations, he was simply identifying with Ed in his pain.

So we are not talking of God as the source of all our pain. Rather we come to see God as with us, alongside us, identifying with us in our pain. That gives me a freedom to come before God in my pain, to express my pain, to pour out all the hurt and confusion. I often find myself turning to a little book I have at home, ‘Out of the deep’. It is a series of reflections on finding God in the dark places of life. While he was still at school, the author suffered the loss of his father. For a while he seemed to cope. He speaks of one afternoon when he was studying music in Rome; it all seemed to come in on him when he was visiting the magnificent Church of St Paul without the walls one wet December afternoon.

‘When I went there .... teenagers were playing football in the park and hurtling around the piazza on motor scooters. I was suddenly gripped by a terrible loneliness; and when I entered the vast and dimly lit basilica with its eighty marble columns and gorgeous mosaics I was overwhelmed, not just with awe but with anger, at the God who had taken away my father and yet seemed to enjoy dwelling in buildings of such icy magnificence; anger too at a world which could go happily about its business as heedless of my loss as God was. I gave vent to my feelings in tears of fury and self pity; and neither the laughing footballers nor the God of the great basilica took any notice. Yet I was left with a strangely clear awareness that it was all right to be angry and lonely and to say so – and that, in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard.’ (*Out of the Deep – page 2*)

It was alright to be angry ... and that in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard. Like Job he didn't get any answers, but he felt he had been heard by God. He had broken through the isolation of the opening words of Psalm 22, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?', that cry of loneliness attributed to Jesus in the darkness of Calvary.

Therein lies our point of contact. As we are reminded as we continue in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning. The God we worship is not remote from our experiences of pain and suffering, he is a God who knows what it is all about, who has experienced in the person of Jesus all the trials and tribulations of this mortal life. Some one we can indeed approach in confidence to find grace and mercy in time of need.

Job's friends were encouraging Job to look for meaning to his suffering in something that had happened in Job's life. Job knew instinctively that that was the wrong approach – he sought meaning by seeking the presence of God. At the core of the Christian Gospel is a similar recognition that ultimately meaning and purpose are not to be found in anything that has happened in my life – rather we find that ultimately that meaning is to be found in something that happened in God's life, in the death and resurrection of Christ, in fellowship with him, trusting in him, we approach with confidence the throne of grace.