

## Looking Anew at the Realities of Suffering

by David Gibson

Profound suffering, like a howling wind sweeping over and around people, is a force to contend with. It shakes people, knocks them off balance and causes them to feel uncertain what to do or which way to turn.

Harsh suffering damages the hope that people require and leaves them feeling isolated in their anguish—alone, misunderstood, weakened and struggling.

It seems important to state that human suffering is painful. The terms “pain” and “suffering” frequently are linked, as if to suggest they are twins.

Christians take the pain of suffering most seriously. The crucifix behind or above the altar in a Catholic church vividly reminds believers that Christ suffered an utterly painful death on a cross.

Yet, the Christian view of suffering is complex. A church’s central crucifix, after all, is a reminder also that Christ’s death was redemptive. He suffered for others.

While suffering is not a goal in itself, Christians hold nonetheless that our suffering can be Christ-like—that times of suffering can become times for doing good and growing as persons.

The First Letter of Peter says to believers that Christ “suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps” (2:21).

The fifth chapter in the Gospel of Matthew brings the paradoxical, thought-provoking dimensions of suffering to the fore. “Blessed are they who mourn,” the beatitudes inform us. Blessed, too, “are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.”

Fear tends to be suffering’s travel companion—a fear, often, of not knowing what the future holds.

A seedbed for fear is provided by a sense of powerlessness over the cause of one’s suffering: a job loss;

a debilitating illness; the seeming inability to communicate effectively with a family member; the damage done by a natural disaster.

Suffering assumes countless forms, and those who suffer include individuals, families, entire cities and even nations. A dominating image of suffering at this time depicts refugee families fleeing violence in their homelands and fearing for their survival.

Augmenting their pain is the lack of anywhere to go—anywhere they will be welcomed or wanted, that is.

Pope Francis mentioned many forms of suffering in his November 2016 apostolic letter for the conclusion of the church’s Year of Mercy. Titled *Mercy and Misery (Misericordia et Misera)*, the letter invited an unleashing of “the creativity of mercy.”

“Whole peoples suffer hunger and thirst, and we are haunted by pictures of children with nothing to eat,” the pope wrote. “Throngs of people,” moreover, “continue to migrate from one country to another in search of food, work, shelter and peace.”

Disease, the pope pointed out, “is a constant cause of suffering that cries out for assistance, comfort and support.” He called attention to prisons as places where confinement often “is accompanied by serious hardships due to inhumane living conditions.”

Illiteracy, the pope noted, “remains widespread, preventing children from developing their potential and exposing them to new forms of slavery.”

Everyone needs consolation, the pope commented. For, “no one is spared suffering, pain and misunderstanding.” The cause may be “a spiteful remark born of envy, jealousy or anger.” The cause may also be “the experience of betrayal, violence and abandonment.”

Suffering “need not only be physical,” Pope Francis observed during a June 2016 holy year celebration for the sick and people with disabilities. “One of today’s most frequent pathologies is also spiritual,” he stressed. “It is a suffering of the heart; it causes sadness for lack of love.”

When individuals suffer, others in their lives often suffer too, though differently. Part of the challenge for these others is found in wanting to be of genuine assistance but not knowing exactly what to do or feeling frustrated over whatever they attempt.

The playwright Florian Zeller depicted this kind of situation in his recent play “The Father.” The harsh wind carrying an old man’s suffering—his Alzheimer’s-like dementia—sweeps over the play’s other characters too, his adult daughter particularly. Her suffering, impatience and pain become palpable.

All her best plans for her father seem to come to naught. What should she do for him, for herself, for the others who are part of her life? She cares greatly,

but her confused understanding of her father’s symptoms is great too.

“Blessed are the merciful,” the Gospel of Matthew proclaims in its list of the beatitudes (5:7). But what does mercy look like in a situation like the one “The Father” describes?

Clearly, not just the father, but his daughter too required the mercifully kind action of others.

In others who suffer pain it is possible to touch “the suffering flesh of Christ,” Pope Francis wrote in *The Joy of the Gospel*, his 2013 apostolic exhortation.

“Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length,” the pope said. “Yet Jesus wants us to touch . . . the suffering flesh of others.”

He wants us to “enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness.”

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