

Ask Fr James

Please explain; "God will never give us more than we can handle"

The commonest question in the face of suffering and pain is: Why does God allow suffering in the world? God does not cause suffering. However, tragedies, large and small, sudden or chronic, interrupt the flow of our lives and cause us suffering occasionally. A number of studies have shown that people who are more religious do better than those who are less religious in times of crisis and suffering.

Our Christian and Catholic understanding of suffering is that God is the Crucified God; a God who literally suffers with us. God suffered on the cross thereby identifying with the suffering of the whole world. This understanding is called "theology of the cross." "God loves the world, God suffers where creatures suffer." The core of this doctrine explains that; to say that God does not suffer is to make of God an unfeeling monster in the face of so much suffering today. To think of God as separate from suffering would be just as erroneous as to think of Christ without the cross. It would be a suffering-free Christianity.

Jesus promises that those who follow him will experience suffering but he cheered up his disciples about suffering when he said; "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). When a Christian suffers, it is a participation in the suffering of God who offered His only begotten Son to suffer and die on the cross for the world. The cross of Christ enables the Christian to find life hidden under death and healing under suffering.

There is no freedom from suffering. When Jesus was faced with the suffering of others, as when Lazarus died, he lamented (John 11:35). When faced with his upcoming death in the garden of Gethsemane, he lamented and when faced with his own suffering on the cross, he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Suffering is not merely something to be avoided or eliminated, as in our secular culture. It is not merely something to be overcome. Instead, it has the potential to transform us through the loving intervention of God into something that can benefit us. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

For us Christians, suffering is not an illusion. The solution to suffering cannot be found inside of ourselves, but is found in God's loving provision of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the savior who can sympathize with suffering because of his own suffering; he is the model for how to suffer. Through following Jesus' example, suffering itself can be redeeming and transforming as God uses it to accomplish God's purposes in our lives. For sure, God will never give us more than we can handle.

