

THE GOD WHO GETS INVOLVED

One of the most popular religions in the west is Buddhism. It seems to offer peacefulness, a kind of tranquillity, escape from pressures of the world.

John Stott, a Christian writer, says this: I have entered many Buddhist temples, and seen the statue of Buddha “*legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world.*” I’ve seen a few Buddhas myself....beautiful, serene - ‘reclining Buddha’....Yet isn’t one of the reasons people struggle with God, their sense that he is just that - ‘remote’, ‘detached’, not bothered; a kind of ‘out there’ God who doesn’t really know what it’s like to face agonies?

Jesus seems to be remote from the problem when people come to tell him Lazarus is sick. He stays put for two more days. Two more days – not much but an eternity if you’re near death’s door. ‘the ambulance took an hour to come’.....

Does he not realise? The Bible is full of things like that ‘How long O lord?’ (psalmist) Have you forgotten us?

How long will we suffer? Why do the wicked prosper? For thousands of years it has looked, at times, as if God either doesn’t know what’s going on, or doesn’t care, or can’t do anything about it.

One day Jesus ignores a centurion whose servant is sick and attends to a woman who shouldn’t have been anywhere near him because she’s considered unclean. The servant dies.

Another time he’s in a boat and the disciples think they’re going to drown and he’s asleep and they ask ‘don’t you care...?’

And when we’ve got things we’re deeply concerned about, when someone we love is about to die, why doesn’t Jesus seem bothered? That is a big question.

Why does Jesus stay where he is? He says it’s for ‘God’s glory’ which doesn’t seem very helpful for anyone else at that point.

THE GOD WHO IS INVOLVED

Sometimes we don't see the whole picture do we?

We need a lot of wisdom to get the timing right.

Think about those other examples I gave about Jesus: When the woman who had a haemorrhage was healed, she was an example of faith to everyone around, she was an example of how Jesus overturned laws about doing things the right way and rewarded trust.

When the centurion trusted Jesus enough even after the servant had died, there was a far bigger impact than a mere healing that some might put down to him not being very ill in the first place. And so we have a woman and a Gentile who showed the people of Israel something about faith.

And in the boat with the waves about to swamp them the disciples learn about the power of God even over the wind and the waves.

They all had to look to Jesus rather than look at the circumstances.

So Jesus waits, then goes and his friends think that by now it’s not safe. The authorities will be after him.

health and safety issues have never been as high up the agenda as they are today. But I’m sure We often mature *through* difficulty, not by avoiding it. (outward bound weeks for schools)

Jesus knows there are some more ‘hours of daylight’ as he puts it, for his work to be done. In fact, this journey isn’t just about comforting a family, or even about a spectacular miracle, it’s the start of his own last journey to death himself. Not so remote from agony after all.

When he gets there, Lazarus has been dead four days.

Jesus sees the tomb and his emotions pour out. Actually it’s not so much about tears. The Greek word is about outrage, about guts and anger, about snorting like a horse. Death is a tyrant. God didn’t build death into the world. But since man’s fall into sin and mistrust, everything has been spoilt and life is cut short.

[There's a poem I'm sometimes asked to read at funerals which says that death is 'nothing at all'. I understand why it gives comfort, but I don't believe death is nothing at all.] Jesus is outraged at the pain and destruction that comes with death. The garden of Eden shows us a first death of a spiritual kind – Adam and Eve separated from the goodness of God by their sin. Physical death follows. Jesus feels it. He is involved. What's more, he doesn't just stand on the outside of it, looking on and trying to understand. In a few days, he'll be dying himself.

Remember John Stott and his Buddhist temples? He goes on to say: "*each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his*" (*The Cross of Christ* p.336)

God is more involved in suffering than we could ever know. Yet there has to be more.

If God can't do anything about death, then he's powerless and it doesn't matter if he suffers with me or he doesn't.

THE GOD WHO DOES SOMETHING ABOUT IT

Jesus says to Martha: "*I am the resurrection and I am the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and he who lives and believes in me will never die.*" (v.25) *Do you believe this?*"

Then in the most spectacular of all his miraculous signs, death is turned into life and a dead man gets up.

'Release him' Jesus says.

I wonder what we might need releasing from today? What binds you up? Maybe there is a physical problem that holds you back. Maybe it's something completely different. Something that wraps you up and prevents you living real life. Maybe today is the day to ask for those clothes to be taken off.

A dead man rises. If anything could show that Jesus was God in person, this ought to do it. Two days earlier they might not have recognised it. Yes, it's asking a lot for people to go through that to see who Jesus is and of course we live with the

fact that we sometimes pray and people don't rise up from death's door. But this is only the beginning.

Jesus, outraged at death and pain, goes on to be killed and suffers too. He takes it head on. But then, best of all, just when you think he's out for the count, he wins. He rises up from death once and for all, making it possible for us to share life for ever with him.

This is who we've got when we suffer agonies of any kind. We don't have all the answers and it will still hurt but at the end of the day, one man said: "*It may be difficult, in the face of human suffering, to believe in God; but if you destroy God, you do not solve your problem, you merely leave yourself alone with it.*"

Instead, perhaps we may believe in a God who is like the father that a little girl was waiting for at the end of a kids' club one night. It was dark and raining outside. All the other children had gone home. She was last. The leader of the club waited a while with her, then asked if she was sure she would be collected or if she needed someone to take her home. 'No' she said. Daddy is coming.' A little later, her father appeared. 'Look' she said 'I told you daddy was coming. And he's brought me my new coat.'

If you're full of joy today, give thanks; if you're struggling today, come to God. He is not remote, he is involved, he has done something about it. He will come, although we may have to wait a while; and he will protect us against the strongest winds and the darkest nights.