

THE WHITLEY LECTURE  
2009

# **A Thousand Crucifixions**

**The materialist subversion of the church?**

**Sally Nelson**

Whitley Publications

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## The Whitley Lecture

The Whitley Lecture was first established in 1949, in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861-1947), the Baptist minister and historian. Following a pastorate in Bridlington, during which he also taught at Rawdon College in Yorkshire, Whitley became the first Principal of the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne (Australia) in 1891. This institution was later renamed Whitley College in his honour.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society in 1908. He edited its journal, which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents – a reputation it still enjoys nearly a century later as the *Baptist Quarterly*. His *History of British Baptists* (1923) remains an important source of information and comment for contemporary historians. Altogether he made an important contribution to Baptist life and self understanding in Britain and Australia, providing a model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the annual lecture in his name is designed as an encouragement to research and writing by Baptist scholars, and to enable the results of this work to be published. The giving of grants, advice and other forms of support by the lectureship committee serves the same purpose. The committee consists of representatives of the British Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, BMS World Mission, the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society. These organisations also provide financial support for its work.

This year the committee is delighted that Revd Sally Nelson has agreed to be our Whitley Lecturer. After reading for a degree in chemistry at Jesus College, Oxford, Sally worked in science publishing for several years. She trained for Christian ministry at



London Bible College and Spurgeon's College, and was pastor at Beechen Grove in Watford for four years. The birth of her daughter Flora, who has special needs, led to a period of leave to care for her. Sally then became a hospice chaplain in Pontefract in Yorkshire and served on the executive of the Association of Hospice and Palliative Care Chaplains. In 2006 a Baptist Union Scholarship enabled her to pursue full-time research at Northern Baptist College in Manchester.

Sally lives in a village in North Yorkshire, where she enjoys riding her bike, discovering accessible walks in the Dales for Flora, and making cakes. She is married to David.

Her lecture explores the challenging issues of suffering, disability and personhood. It is no dry, academic presentation, but a heartfelt and intellectual response to Sally's own experience caring for the terminally ill, and as the mother of a special needs daughter. It is dedicated to Flora and to BUild (the Baptist Union Initiative with people with Learning Disabilities) on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

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# WHITLEY LECTURE 2009

## A THOUSAND CRUCIFIXIONS

### The materialist subversion of the church?

#### 1. *Suffering and meaninglessness*

Jesus said: ‘anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 10:38-39).

In one short sentence Jesus presents a personal challenge that focuses not on the blessings but upon the hardship of the disciplined life, and also provides a critique of human social power structures. Few advertisements for products or services in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be expressed in such terms, for they would attract no purchasers.<sup>1</sup> The church in postmodern western culture thus offers a product that is not obviously desirable, because it does not — or should not — imply that faith in Christ leads to success, happiness and freedom from pain: and certainly not *right now for each individual*, upon which imperative our whole consumer culture is precariously erected.<sup>2</sup> What the faith does

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<sup>1</sup> We could also quote the beatitudes, in which the ‘blessed’ include the poor, weak, bereaved, persecuted *etc.* Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, remarks powerfully that ‘... there is no genuinely Christian way around the scandal [of the cross]. In the final analysis, the only available options are either to reject the cross and with it the core of the Christian faith or to take up one’s cross, follow the Crucified — and be scandalized ever anew by the challenge’. (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, p 26).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘modern’ to mean a commitment to a metanarrative, or master story, told with scientific rigour and a utopian hope; ‘postmodern’ means a loss of confidence in such a master story and hope, and its replacement by individual, relative stories.

offer, however, is a framework of *meaning* for all life's experiences, good and bad, and the importance of this fact cannot be overestimated.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to live without meaning. The psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, who survived the Holocaust in the death camps, observed that it was not suffering that destroyed a person, but suffering without meaning.<sup>3</sup> Frankl's response was to encourage people to adopt a fundamental change in their attitudes towards life, such that they perceived value in the circumstances with which they were faced: 'When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task: his single and unique task... His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden'.<sup>4</sup> Frankl's developed technique of 'logotherapy' contains the concept of ultimate meaning, but deliberately he did not identify the nature of this meaning so that patients of all religious persuasions and none could benefit. However, if we follow Christ, we have not only a meaning, a *telos*, but a particular example and a pattern in Jesus of Nazareth—vitaly, a *story* that we are invited to make our own.<sup>5</sup>

I have often heard people discuss disability, dementia and terminal illness in terms of 'meaningless' suffering, which doubtless describes how that suffering appears to them. Usually 'meaningless' indicates that there is no apparent cause for or useful outcome from the suffering, which view is arguably predicated upon a utilitarian approach to life. I want to argue that if we take the words of Jesus seriously then no suffering falls into that category of meaninglessness, because it all finds meaning in understanding the truth about the fullness of life which we

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Individualism is the commitment to the autonomous, rational subject; materialism is the (dualistic) explanation of things in terms of matter, not spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Discussed in Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's search for meaning, passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Frankl, *ibid*, p 99. The book contains an autobiographical section based upon his camp experiences, followed by a discussion of the therapeutic method Frankl developed after WW2, known as logotherapy.

<sup>5</sup> Narrative both places the events of our lives into a broader, historical dimension, and supplies direction and significance – we use narrative in '... attempting to construct ourselves as significant characters within what we regard as meaningful life stories' (see Mark Johnson, *Moral imagination*, p 165).

are promised (John 10:10). Furthermore, I believe that the ascription of 'meaningless' suffering actually does harm to the status as persons of those who are living with pain, whether physical, psychological or social, by placing them negatively in a category of 'other';<sup>6</sup> and that in the church we are uniquely placed to protest the case of these *anawim*, the dispossessed outsiders. Social theorist, Charles Taylor, in his essay, *The politics of recognition*, comments that '... misrecognition [*i.e.* a negative definition of the other] shows not just a lack of due respect; it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need'.<sup>7</sup>

The suggestion that no suffering is ultimately meaningless does not imply that meaning is therefore easily diagnosed in the circumstances of life — often the opposite. One aim of this lecture is to explore the idea of the church as a mediator of meaning, *including suffering*, in culture; a community in which apparent meaninglessness can be held and valued. The church can mediate because it is the community that reads and interprets the transforming narrative of scripture, but also draws the individual stories of people<sup>8</sup> into that process. I want to use

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<sup>6</sup> For example, how easily do we find ourselves referring to 'those' people, when speaking of the disabled? The article by Gail Landsman (*Signs*, 1998, 24(1), 69-99) describes how mothers of disabled children reorient their concepts of human personhood and value.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *The politics of recognition*, p 26. Taylor discusses the shift in western culture from a social to an individual recognition (of persons) and the consequent development of the concepts of identity and otherness.

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, I shall later be arguing that stories of persons are never wholly individual since we are inescapably relational by nature; however, although our stories are formed in intimate association with others, we do also have a unique perspective and value that becomes identified over time as our 'self'. Taylor speaks of an '*individualized* identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself' (Taylor, *ibid*, p 28). This concept of a 'sedimented' self is also treated by McFadyen and will be discussed later, and has ethical and moral as well as social and relational implications.

as an example the way in which disability is currently perceived and how that perception can be transformed (and this is already happening in some places, but maybe not where we might think). However, this is no single-issue minority argument. Every one of us faces the inevitability of a degree of disability as we get older, as well as the possibility of disability at any age through accident or degenerative illness. Furthermore, with the rapid expansion of medical diagnostics, particularly in genetics, more and more of us will be diagnosed as disabled in some sense as time goes on. But, even more significantly than that, Jesus demonstrates to us that the gospel runs on a different economic system, one in which the weak and foolish put the strong and the wise to shame. The *anawim* learn quickly in life that they are not the ones in control; but their stories, if we can hear them, show us prophetically that suffering is not the enemy but the way to fullness of life. Dissenters, sharing this marginal and possibly prophetic status, are naturally disposed to understand the voices of the *anawim*.

What, then, does it mean to take up the cross and follow Christ? As a parent of a disabled child I have often been told by genuinely well intentioned people that we all have our crosses to bear in life. I admit that I have not found this either pastorally or practically helpful; neither am I persuaded by its implicit individualism, a theme to which I shall return later. When someone mentions bearing a cross to me and I think about my beautiful (though undoubtedly multiply disabled) child, I want to ask questions like: what kind of cross? Can the life of a person made in God's image really be a cross? Whose cross is it anyway? In framing these questions I am not trying to say, perversely, that disability is good, or that it does not make a difference, or that I have never longed for her to be otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

We are understandably reluctant to 'take up the cross', for perhaps two reasons: first, it hurts; secondly, it seems presumptive, for the cross was surely the unique work of Christ. So how should we view disability? The theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, has written extensively and sensitively on the ethics of medicine and disability and warns

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor remarks that a 'difference-blind' society is in fact inhuman because it forces people into a false homogeneity, *ibid*, p 43.



readers, in *Suffering presence*, against misinterpreting the experience of suffering. He notes that the possibility of 'pointless' suffering is indeed terrifying, such that we are tempted to look for sometimes inappropriate explanations in terms of punishment for sin. Hauerwas believes that the pattern of the cross provides a cosmic framework within which to interpret suffering, but he cautions that identifying *all* human suffering with the cross 'has often perverted the Christian faith. Not only does it encourage some unwisely to accept avoidable suffering, but from a theological point of view it makes us think all our suffering is akin to Christ's'.<sup>10</sup> At this point Hauerwas quotes Mennonite J. H. Yoder's view, in *The politics of Jesus*, that only innocent suffering at the hands of evil people is meaningful before God.<sup>11</sup> Is he right?

Interestingly, Hauerwas later revised his view in the light of the comments of a reader who insisted that she had faced her varied experiences of suffering only by understanding them as a share in the cross of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes no other form of witness or ministry is left to us except to bear our suffering as Christ did, with patience and hope: we cannot be active or productive in our discipleship, but this witness we can give. Furthermore, the imitation of Christ to which we are called is the imitation of the *whole* of Christ's life, work and death (not just the victorious elements); and, I would emphasise, by the *whole* church (not by the individual alone, but more of this later). In his book, *The real Jesus*, Luke Timothy Johnson discusses the pattern of discipleship as the imitation of the Christ who lived, died and was resurrected: 'Discipleship does not consist in a countercultural critique of society. Discipleship does not consist in working overwhelming miracles. These elements of the Jesus tradition are not made normative in the way that the pattern of *obedient suffering and loving service* is' [my italics].<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, p32.

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Yoder, *The politics of Jesus*, p 132.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *God, medicine and suffering*, pp 86-89.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Luke Johnson, *The real Jesus*, p166.

Similarly, James Alison<sup>14</sup> notes that the New Testament was written by people who had been transformed by the experience of the crucified and risen Christ, who still bears his scars; the dead and risen Lord, who retains the experience of his death in his new life. Suffering in the cosmic paradigm is more than a nasty temporary episode: it has eternal significance in terms of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Amos Yong,<sup>15</sup> whose brother has Down's Syndrome, discusses the eschaton as *transformative of the present*: sin is forgiven, not erased; Christ is raised but not 'undead'; so we can perhaps believe that disabilities are transformed, not eliminated, and that in this new community it will be all right. This idea is especially important for genetic disabilities that are 'part of' the person in every way, rather than physically 'bolted on' through accident or disease in later life.

I shall say more about the purpose and the interpretation of suffering later: for now let me emphasise that I do not mean that suffering is good in itself, or that we should seek out suffering in some form of religious masochism. There is a strange liberty, however, in choosing to embrace suffering, which robs it of its negative and imposed power; this choice is the difference between meaningful and meaningless suffering and has to do with ultimate meaning or *telos*.

Jesus of Nazareth was, of course, hideously murdered by crucifixion, but the reason that he was so murdered was because his life and teaching were perceived to be politically subversive and destabilising in first-century Palestine, both by Jews and by Romans with vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*. Jesus deliberately told the story of the Kingdom from the margins, alongside the *anawim*, with its consequent embrace of suffering. For the purposes of this lecture I want to work with the generic liberationist sense of crucifixion as the experience of not being heard, or of having one's story suppressed or subverted. I do not want to suggest that this is a sole or sufficient way

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<sup>14</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus, passim*. Alison speaks of Jesus having 'the intelligence of the victim' because 'It is the slaughtered one who is made alive, given back in the resurrection. It is not as though the resurrection cured him of being slaughtered... [it] gives him back as the slaughtered one' (p 21).

<sup>15</sup> Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, pp 269-291.

of interpreting the cross, but to understand it as one among many helpful metaphors. In taking this approach, I think we can look at disability not as a single issue, but as a window onto our cultural evaluation of the person and the positive challenge to that cultural process that is presented by Baptist ecclesiology.

Baptists traditionally place a high value on scripture as the story that exposes us to the authority of Jesus Christ. Baptists form gathered groups of people characterised by equality. Hierarchies of power are eschewed in favour of corporate government; potentially exclusive and limiting creeds are rejected in favour of a dynamic corporate hearing and speaking of scripture that is inspired by the Spirit; and a place in the establishment was traded historically for the integrity of marginal dissenting status in the process of seeking after truth.<sup>16</sup> The result is the possibility of truly inclusive, listening communities that are open to the transforming story of the gospel. In the context of this lecture it is vital to retain the sense of the gospel as the story of the *crucified* and resurrected Son of God, and thus to understand ourselves as the community that is, ultimately, constituted by its experiences of and response to the incarnation, *including fully the experience of suffering*. In this task, if we can do it, we continue to dissent from a materialist culture that has distanced itself from any meaningful engagement with pain or privation.

## 2. *What is suffering?*

What actually constitutes suffering? Hauerwas comments on the difficulty of describing suffering, since it is highly subjective, but considers it to have the character of an imposition, or a threat to one's integrity.<sup>17</sup> Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement, coined the phrase 'total pain', which is probably as close to a generic description of suffering as it is possible to get.<sup>18</sup> Total pain has

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Five core values*, which lists the characteristics of Baptist identity as prophetic, inclusive, sacrificial, missionary, and worshipping communities.

<sup>17</sup> Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, pp 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Cicely Saunders & Mary Baines, *Living with dying*, p 13.

physical, psychological and social components because it recognises that a person is not just a mechanical body with physical symptoms, but a conscious and responsive being existing within a complex network of relationships and circumstances, which all contribute to a sense of wellbeing or otherwise. In other words, a person exists within a story. Every hospice doctor, nurse, or chaplain could tell us of cases where massive doses of pain relief were unsuccessful, but the subsequent resolution of a family dispute, or the preparation of a will to deal with material practicalities after death, has brought peace to dying persons. Suffering indisputably has a significant psychological component. Jesus on the cross endured terrible physical pain, but this was intensified and arguably exceeded by the experience of abandonment both by his human friends and by God the Father. *So, one dimension of suffering can be isolation.* When a person's story is ignored or silenced, his or her sense of self-worth is diminished and the cycle of suffering is intensified. Disabled persons are often excluded from the mainstream of social interaction and it is important for the able to realise what is happening to such persons when this happens.

Secondly, *suffering can be imposed from without as well as undergone within.* Niebuhr describes suffering as the experience of submission and endurance, of being out of control, such that a sufferer is a victim.<sup>19</sup> There is a debate within the disabled community about the disability that is imposed by the able-bodied majority as distinct from the disability that has to be accepted as intrinsic physical, mental or sensory impairment. Examples of imposed disability might be inadequate building access or sound systems; assumptions about height, mobility or intelligence; or general infrastructural planning that is designed for those who can walk, hear and see without consultation with those who cannot. At the time of writing there is a news debate about open-plan city centres, intended to be safer for pedestrians but for blind people becoming a featureless desert in which one cannot find one's bearings, because the open space is devoid of objects that can be detected with a cane. This well intentioned development has actually exacerbated the exclusion of blind people.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *The responsible self*, p 60.



Susan Wendell, a chronic ME sufferer and feminist writer, comments that when she imagines a society without disabilities she thinks not of being cured, but of accessibility.<sup>20</sup> The designation of people as disabled by the able-bodied is an example of Taylor's 'misrecognition', an abuse of power that creates a category of 'other' people. Things that are assumed to be entitlements for the able are described as extra help, care and services for the disabled, which compounds the exclusion, says Wendell.<sup>21</sup> Theologian Frances Young, parent of a son with severe special needs, speaks of the pain of dealing with the state over the family's care provision: 'There is something about the way state services are organized which creates an 'us' and 'them' situation which is profoundly alienating... It is time we realized just how uncaring and inhuman our institutions are'.<sup>22</sup> In a consumer economy based upon productivity it is easier and more cost-effective to provide and police a standard system that perpetuates the distinctions between able and disabled, than to listen compassionately to a story (remembering that compassion literally means 'to suffer with'). Hauerwas notes that 'The mentally handicapped (*sic*) cannot help but appear anomalous in a society formed by the ethos of freedom', because they are perceived as limitations, with reduced choices.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the gospel pattern - and therefore our ideal in the church - is one of Jesus attending to the individual in context and *restoring that person to his or her community*. If we were to replace the word 'healing' with the phrase 'restoration to true relationship' in our debates, how would it change our view of the gospel and our expectations of the healing ministry today?

In the framework of this lecture we might say that suffering is imposed when the stories of the disabled are not heard. Sometimes what happens is that a story is distorted to create (often unintentional) false suffering: the presumption by the able-bodied of needs that may not in fact be there. This presumption of inability subtly devalues the disabled

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Wendell, *The rejected body*, p 55.

<sup>21</sup> Wendell, *ibid*, pp 23-40. See also Anita Ho's discussion of what autonomy means for a disabled person in an ableist society, *J. Bioethical Inq.*, 2008, 5, 193-207.

<sup>22</sup> Frances Young, *Face to face*, p 121.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, p 15.

person's integrity, but is difficult to expose because of our corporate collusion with stereotypes of the other. Geoffrey Lay, an Anglican priest whose disabled child died aged 5 months and who in mid-life lost his own eyesight from a genetic disorder, speaks powerfully of disabled people becoming 'compassion fodder' in churches, and the 'professional' rather than relational nature of the caring that can develop. He writes, 'So often, disabled people in the Church are regarded as fodder for the caring opportunities of those who believe themselves both better able to care and less needful of being cared for'.<sup>24</sup> Baptist Faith Bowers, a founder member of BUiLD,<sup>25</sup> has written from her own experience of the well-meant but painful remarks made to parents of disabled children: 'they' (the children) are 'angels unawares' or 'special blessings', and their parents are sometimes stereotyped as 'models of perseverance and faith'.<sup>26</sup> In fact, they have no choice but to persevere because social provision is pitifully inadequate, and the projection of a saintly, sacrificial image colludes with that injustice while disguising that family's need for practical support from the church. Equally unhelpful is the high profile given to disabled 'heroes' such as Stephen Hawking, Christopher Reeve, and possibly (in church circles) Joni Erickson-Tada, who are generally perceived as courageous 'overcomers'. The undoubtedly impressive achievements of these individuals are simply not possible for everyone, especially the materially poor or socially disadvantaged, and our admiration may simply reflect our desire to capitulate to the norms of a material consumerist society and duck the radical nature of the gospel challenge. As Frances Young<sup>27</sup> says, 'The prevailing philosophy is "normalisation",' which is not always appropriate, sensitive, or just.

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Lay, *Seeking signs and missing wonders*, p 115.

<sup>25</sup> BUiLD is the Baptist Union Initiative with people with Learning Disability, founded 25 years ago as a special interest group, and which has become a significant resource for Baptists and other Christian denominations in Britain and beyond.

<sup>26</sup> Faith Bowers, *Who sinned?*, pp 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Frances Young, *Face to face*, p 174.

True inclusion does not mean that the incoming person tries to be normal: it means that the community changes to become inclusive.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, *suffering never takes places acontextually*. It is always the suffering of *this* person or *these* people in *this* setting. Commonly we adjure one another to think that there is always someone worse off than ourselves. Were it possible to absolutise such a claim, we might agree: but in fact one person's trivia is another person's agony. Hauerwas is surely correct when he says that a generic concept of suffering does not really exist: it is always part of someone's story.<sup>29</sup> The very fact that it is so means that we have to interpret suffering as part of the hearing of that person's story: and the act of interpretation begins to locate the story within a metanarrative, because we cannot see 'the view from nowhere' – *i.e.* we are necessarily committed to a contextualised position.<sup>30</sup>

This mechanism applies equally to the gospel story, which is also contextual. Luke Johnson remarks that to dissect the gospels, or to separate them from the other New Testament writings, is to lose the pattern and meaning of that earliest experience as perceived (and, of course, interpreted) by the NT writers.<sup>31</sup> This process is the one that inevitably leads to meaning and so the question is whether meaningless suffering can exist at all; and if it does, can we get at it? The universal conviction that meaningless suffering is terrifying means that rather than submit to this fear we will always look for a 'why?', which may lead to the causal link of suffering with sin and punishment that fits so

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<sup>28</sup> See Donald Senior, 'Beware the Canaanite woman' in Marilyn Bishop (ed), *Religion and disability*.

<sup>29</sup> Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, p 28.

<sup>30</sup> This insight derives from relativity theory, that the 'observer' of an experiment is never objectively independent of that experiment. See, for example, Thomas Nagel, *The view from nowhere*: 'This book is about a single problem: how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included', p 3; or Richard Niebuhr, *The meaning of revelation*: '... all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower... ', p 7.

<sup>31</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The real Jesus*, p 151.

neatly into our materialist culture. This link incidentally lends enormous power to medical professionals, who have become the new order of priests, able to deal with this problem of pain: when healing occurs, we consider ourselves absolved, and can postpone once again our need to confront the nature of a reality that includes pain. This connection of sin and suffering is a frequent theme in the Bible, but arguably Jesus never concurs with it.<sup>32</sup> Suffering is philosophically unavoidable, since we must set limits to our behaviour for the good of all. The pattern of the gospel is that through suffering we understand meaning in terms of our commitment to others.

### *3. Persons and stories*

We have talked about the valuing of persons and so it is important to think about what a person is. There are myriad ways of discussing personhood, and I am choosing to base my thoughts on the dialogical approach developed by Alistair McFadyen,<sup>33</sup> which in turn draws upon the work of Martin Buber and Rom Harré.

McFadyen was a mental health professional prior to his theological career, and this experience formed his theology. He observed that cultural understandings of the ‘person’ shaped the type of care given to patients. In particular, he identified the dangers inherent in the extremes of overly individual and overly collective interpretations of the person, and sought a third way, adopting a view based upon relational

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<sup>32</sup> In the Old Testament suffering is frequently interpreted as a punishment: see, for example, the story of Noah, the afflictions of Pharaoh; the story of Job; the exclusions of Leviticus. In the NT the most obvious passages are the story of the man born blind in John 9, in which Jesus explicitly refutes the connection; and the man lowered through the roof in Mark 2 (Matthew 9, Luke 5), in which Jesus publicly forgives the sick man’s sins. Some interpreters link sickness and sin in this latter passage but a more convincing hermeneutic in context is the ongoing theme of the non-recognition of Christ by the Jewish leaders.

<sup>33</sup> Alistair I. McFadyen, *The call to personhood*.



communication or 'dialogue'.<sup>34</sup> The communication that is exchanged both 'reflects back' to us who we are, but also can change us; and so we are both responsive and proactive in a dynamic process with others, not a fixed, static 'me'. Thus each person becomes 'centred' through his/her relations with other personal centres: my dialogues lead to a pattern of behaviour and of memory that constitutes a normal form of 'me', but does not close off the possibility of novelty or change. Primarily, we are in dialogue with God: we are all addressed by him, unavoidably in relation with him, but in grace he does not determine our response. We are free to ignore God, but we cannot change the fact that he addresses us: we are contingent beings. God as Trinity is the archetype of openness and vulnerability to the other, and of relationship and communication. McFadyen argues that we image God in our ability to enter into dialogical relationships: this imaging constitutes the ontological reality of the human being.

For a person, there is no substantial permanent core that is 'self', but rather our self is held in being by our relationship to, and the expectations of, others.<sup>35</sup> We are unique because our dialogues are centred (in a social rather than a space-time framework). McFadyen describes a cyclical reinforcement of identity: we believe ourselves to be a certain person, act in accordance with that, and then experience

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<sup>34</sup> An overly individual view led to a mechanical medical approach to the body, and therapy would normally comprise physical or drug based interventions. Over-emphasis on the collective might mean that therapy focused (say) on the family and relationships, but reduced the person's own responsibility, autonomy and self-worth. McFadyen sought a third way that held these in balance and found it in a dialogical, dialectic approach to the person. Dialogue does not necessarily imply spoken or written communication. It can take many forms of interpersonal relationality. The dialectic aspect means that we always exist in dynamic relationship and are never a static unity.

<sup>35</sup> Some writers speak of the interhuman or interperson, see, for example, Rom Harré or Zygmunt Bauman. With a Jungian flavour, McFadyen describes both a 'deep' and a 'local' element to self, the former being more of a constant while the latter is the visible, adaptable dimension.

ourselves consistently within the community.<sup>36</sup> McFadyen says: ‘Persons... are structures of response sedimented from past relations in which they have been addressed, have been responded to and have communicated themselves in particular forms. The image [of God] exists in its fullness where undistorted, dialogical address meets a formally reciprocal response; where the invitation to dialogue is accepted’.<sup>37</sup>

Now, and this is important for the issue of disability, our dialogues and expectations are rarely as they should be. The address of God is always undistorted, but our dialogues with one another are prone to distortion or sin. Distortion may be accidental (‘I have not understood you’ or ‘I have not communicated clearly’), or deliberate (‘I have not listened properly or spoken fairly’, or even, ‘be silent’). We have no control over the expectations of others or over their response to us; and thus we can be denied full personhood status by these distortions. Examples of distorted communications could include the overcompensation of parents for a child, leading to immaturity; or one marriage partner treating the other with aggression, leading to fear and poor self-image; or simply the sense that someone is less than competent physically or mentally and thus is a net consumer of social resources rather than a valuable producer. Social theorist Charles Taylor says, ‘... we are all aware of how identity can be formed or malformed through the course of our contact with significant others’.<sup>38</sup>

Once the disabled person understands him- or herself as socially inferior, then that is the experience of self that is cyclically reinforced by society. Geoffrey Lay comments: ‘It is not difficult to make a disabled person feel worthless by constantly implying that he or she is not “up to speed”...’; while wheelchair-bound Lutheran pastor, Walter Hermanns, describes himself as a ‘rolling icon’ whose pastoral competence is constantly questioned because he is disabled: will he drop the communion cup today?<sup>39</sup> If our society is consumerist,

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<sup>36</sup> McFadyen, *ibid*, pp 98-100.

<sup>37</sup> McFadyen, *ibid*, p 41; see also Charles Taylor, *The politics of recognition*, p 25.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *ibid*, p 36.

<sup>39</sup> Walter E. Hermanns, *The rolling icon*, pp 74-76.

materialist and individualist then someone who cannot produce goods or services, or be independent of others, is unable to be addressed and heard in an undistorted manner. An equal dialogue is not about quantities of communication but about each partner in dialogue having equal access to the dynamic relationship.<sup>40</sup> David Pailin, reflecting theologically on his encounter with disability, notes that a person's value is not in what they can *give*, but in what they can *be given*, and links this insight to the vulnerable openness of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup> McFadyen uses the terms 'call' and 'response' to describe the sides of the dialogue. In a true dialogue call and response should be appropriate and sensitive to the other.

This personhood model allows none of us to be innocent. Each of us can either develop or assault another's identity by the nature of our dialogue with that person and by the social expectations with which we concur. The biblical metaphors of the church as the body of Christ prod us towards this interdependent and corporate ontology of the person but our deeply entrenched cultural individualism battles against a sense of true community. Volf comments on the apostle Paul's scandalous egalitarian shift in the understanding of community from one that is 'differentiating but internally undifferentiated' to the 'unifying but internally differentiated' body of Christ. He remarks that 'The Spirit does not erase bodily inscribed differences, but allows access into the one body of Christ to the people with such differences on equal terms. What the Spirit does erase (or at least loosen) is a stable and socially constructed correlation between differences and social roles'.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Volf notes that this new unity in Christ is achieved through suffering — in and through the crucified Christ. The broken body of Christ is opened up to others; it is no longer self-contained and bounded, and we can enter it through the act of communion. Jean Vanier notes this same point in the context of l'Arche: that ultimately there is no difference between meeting Christ in the Eucharist and

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<sup>40</sup> McFadyen, *Call*, pp 143- 147.

<sup>41</sup> David Pailin, *A gentle touch*, p 113. A person is also valued for what s/he already is, and not what s/he might become, p 148.

<sup>42</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, pp 47-48.

meeting him in the *anawim*.<sup>43</sup> In dialogical terms, the address of Christ is always to liberate and develop and propel towards full personhood (full membership of the body); though in a sense we never ‘arrive’ because full personhood does not indicate a static or closed state, but one that is always open to change through the address of the other as we respond dynamically to new situations and encounters.

Keeping to the outline of this model we can understand the church as the storytelling community, or the place of equal dialogue or ‘multilogue’. The church’s story is shaped by the gospel narrative, which codifies the address of God in Jesus Christ to humanity. The church is addressed by the Word which is characterised by liberation and healing, and believes herself to be the community that bears the image of God as the body of Christ. Pailin notes the importance of everyday encounters with other people as potentially revelatory of the nature of God: even more powerfully than ecstatic encounters with the divine.<sup>44</sup> Thus the address of the church to the world should also be characterised by liberation and healing, rather than distortion. Whether this has always been historically true is debatable, but certainly there are many times when it has been. Positive examples in the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be the Barmen Declaration,<sup>45</sup> the development of base communities as places of social justice in Latin America, and the Truth and Reconciliation process as an example of non-retributive justice in post-apartheid South Africa.

I think we can frame the question of subversion in terms of what influences the church’s address to the world: is she influenced primarily by the Word of God, or by the world of culture? Is the church subverted by materialism or does she subvert the culture of materialism by her marginal status? Does she speak a prophetic word, or consent to the conversation that is already going on? And what does it mean to *dissent*? The dictionary definition includes the linguistic meaning of ‘disagreement’ or ‘difference of opinion’, but also states that dissent is

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<sup>43</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and growth*, pp 100-101.

<sup>44</sup> David Pailin, *A gentle touch*, p 133: ‘The incarnation is a continuing reality’.

<sup>45</sup> Written by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others in 1934, as a statement of the Confessing Church against the Nazi ‘German Church’ movement.



the 'practical expression of disagreement with the form of religious worship which prevails or is authoritatively established in any country: nonconformity'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, there is that quality about dissent that is inherently relative to the *status quo*, and necessarily a minority pursuit. This quality is that of the prophetic and the marginal, and reminds us that we began by thinking of the unpopular nature of the message of Jesus: that we should bear a cross.

In another place Jesus reminds his disciples that the poor will always be with them (John 12:8). There will always be an *anawim*, and it is the church's place to make sure that the power dialogues of society are challenged by the example of an equality of dialogue, a place where stories are properly heard and freely told. In the Baptist practice of church meeting and seeking the mind of Christ, we have a structure that is equipped to hear the *anawim*. In our practices of ministry we have tried to ensure that there is an equality of opportunity for other voices to speak. In our commitment to the Word of God we allow the story of scripture to write and rewrite the script for the life drama in which we are the actors. When someone is baptised the testimony — the telling of the transforming power of the gospel narrative — is the part by which we are moved and challenged. Can we envisage a role for the church meeting in which we continue to bring our stories, share and listen together in the power of the gospel testimony, and become perceived as a dissenting force for good in our dialogue with culture, rather than an archaic irrelevance?

#### 4. *The nesting of stories*

I have already referred to the insight, derived from relativity theory, that one's personal point of view is always contextual. Richard Niebuhr commented in *The meaning of revelation* that '... the point of view which a man occupies in regarding religious as well as any other sort of reality is of profound importance'.<sup>47</sup> If this insight is true then our stories are always dependent in part upon the stories around us and over

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<sup>46</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

<sup>47</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The meaning of revelation*, pp 6-7.

us: stories are nested within bigger stories of which they are never independent. The biggest story is of course always the story of what kind of God we worship, because if God is ultimate then his story shapes all reality. Here we need to be very careful: Niebuhr notes that ‘the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative, which in Christianity takes the form of substituting religion, revelation, church or Christian morality for God’.<sup>48</sup> We forget easily that we are not objective in our interpretations yet our subjectivity is extremely important.<sup>49</sup>

Rather than thinking about ourselves as individuals within churches within society, let us recast the model as follows: we are dialogue partners within narrative Christian communities within postmodern metaculture. The church, sandwiched in the middle, has a choice to make about its ‘controlling’ story. Because God gives us freedom in our response to his address, there will always be the possibility that Christian stories (of churches and individuals) will find their rationale from the conforming narrative of culture rather than from the transformative narrative of the gospel. The subtitle of this lecture (*The materialist subversion of the church?*) is thus framed because we can argue that we have so accommodated materialism in our thinking about God that we cannot see it: materialism has become structural in the church as well as in culture, and may be acquiring the characteristics of idolatry. Volf comments that ‘Our coziness with the surrounding culture has made us so blind to many of its evils that, instead of calling them into question, we offer our own versions of them — in God’s name and with a good conscience’.<sup>50</sup> This process can have potentially frightening consequences; in the case of ethnic conflict the church has even been able to sacralise murder on numerous occasions in history.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr, *ibid*, pp viii-ix.

<sup>49</sup> Francis Watson discusses the dialectic relationship between individuals, churches and communities in *Text, church and world*; while Sean Winter looks at the covenantal interpretive practices of Baptist communities in his Whitley Lecture of 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion*, p 36.

<sup>51</sup> For example, the Inquisition, or the persecution of Anabaptists.

It is around the question of suffering that Christian subversion is especially focused, because suffering is where the questions of and about God become uncomfortable in a materialist framework. Moltmann goes so far as to say that suffering pushes us to choose between belief and atheism, for the atheist will simply say that a suffering world and a perfect God are logically incompatible, yet our God actually dies upon a cross.<sup>52</sup> As Miroslav Volf comments, ‘The inner logic of the cross demands acceptance of two interrelated beliefs that are deeply at odds with some basic sentiments of modernity. First, modernity is predicated on the belief that ... *the world can be healed...* Second, modernity has set its high hopes in the twin strategies of *social control* and *rational thought*’ [my italics].<sup>53</sup> The search for a theodicy has been an ongoing theme of theology that tries to harmonise the perfect and ultimate God with the existence of evil, yet most theodicies remain unconvincing to those who suffer chronically, perhaps because they do not correspond sufficiently to real life.<sup>54</sup> Pailin offers the reflection<sup>55</sup> that we simply cannot believe in that which does not make sense.

The great success of science in modernism has now brought us to a place where we are highly dependent upon the scientific enterprise as a source of meaning in our culture. Returning to the primary question for Christians – in the image of what kind of God are we made? – we find that there have been remarkable conversations during the past century between the realms of science and theology over the nature of reality. Briefly, if God is considered to ‘intervene’ in the world his action is placed outside the normal processes of nature, which raises difficult consequent questions, especially about God’s integrity regarding the matters we describe as ‘undeserved’ and ‘meaningless’

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<sup>52</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 221. Moltmann says that a pure philosophical theism leads to a cross ‘evacuated’ of deity.

<sup>53</sup> Volf, *ibid*, pp 27-28.

<sup>54</sup> Hauerwas even calls theodicies ‘parasitical’, because they assume that ‘happiness’ is normal and that evil is purely a metaphysical problem rather than a practical challenge. *God, suffering and medicine*, pp 39-59.

<sup>55</sup> Pailin, *A gentle touch*, p 86.

suffering. Even if we say (with humility and reason) that we cannot possibly understand God's ways, then why would a good and loving God confuse our meagre intellects with humanly inexplicable and apparently arbitrary events? Why do good people often suffer and bad people often thrive? This difficulty does not mean that science is implicitly opposed to religion: there are many good arguments for a synthesis.<sup>56</sup> However, the characteristic processes of science are reductionist and materialist and, if we believe in God as an abstract 'other', then science will be unable to 'investigate' him meaningfully. Reductionism commits us to a process of deconstruction, and materialism commits us ultimately to a loss of the transcendent, both of which render God a countercultural concept.

Many contemporary theologians now locate the conceptual difficulties of western culture with the very existence of God in an historical overemphasis on Greek philosophical explanations. The Greek gift of logical, rational thought was progressively applied to the Hebrew understanding of an all-powerful (because singular) God. The resulting deity was characterised as perfect, which is biblically accurate but came to have the connotations of a separate, untouchable, and unchanging 'Other', rather than one who is perfect in his character as love; this deity was also all-powerful, with power being understood as force rather than the power made perfect in weakness of 1 Corinthians 1. As modern science gradually uncovered more and more of the way in which the world works without reference to any deity, this detached and autocratic God, the 'immortal, invisible, God only wise', became both unnecessary and unbelievable for most people, most of the time. One consequence of this development is the very high regard in which modern medicine is held in society: and here we are returned to the issues of disability once again.

Disabled persons will tell you that their lives can be defined by medical intervention. Doctors name and tame the idiosyncrasies of their personal forms of embodiment, and doctors normally decide when to stop treatment. I do not at all want to cast doubt upon the excellent care

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Ian Barbour, *Nature, human nature, and God*; John Polkinghorne, *Theology in the context of science*; Philip Clayton, *God and contemporary science*.

and commitment of most doctors, but rather to draw attention to the immense professional power they have been given in our culture and which alters the dynamics of the doctor-patient dialogue. Hauerwas notes positively that as a culture we set aside this group of people literally to ‘stand by’ the sick and to interpret and mediate their stories for us.<sup>57</sup> To have solidarity with the suffering in this way is a unique role. Other commentators have more negatively drawn attention to what is known as the ‘medical gaze’,<sup>58</sup> which is a reductionist and materialist approach to sick persons that evaluates them in terms of their symptoms and possible interventions. A person with complex problems will see one doctor for orthopaedic help, another for neurology, a third for hearing loss. It is difficult, because of our reductionist philosophies, for any one of these specialists to grasp the condition of the whole person: not just ‘deaf’ but a deaf mother, sister, teacher, with poor mobility and neurological symptoms, and so on. Diagnosis (a reductionist exercise) rules, because this is the way to control and success; but the disabled person becomes identified by a list of things that are wrong rather than as a whole being within a relational context.<sup>59</sup>

Recently there has been a growing interest in ‘narrative medicine’, in which the doctor listens carefully to the patient’s story and any action is then decided jointly.<sup>60</sup> This represents a true dialogue, which can actively address the distortion that can intensify suffering: we could say that the medical gaze is replaced by the ‘gaze of Christ’: the compassionate willingness to enter into a liberating encounter with another.<sup>61</sup> This ‘beautiful’ encounter changes us and can transform the suffering experience. Any of us might helpfully ask what kind of gaze

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<sup>57</sup> Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, p 13.

<sup>58</sup> The development of the term ‘medical gaze’ is discussed by Sharon R. Kaufman & Lynn M. Morgan in *Ann. Rev. Anthropol.*, 2005, 34, 328.

<sup>59</sup> See Alison Webster, *Wellbeing*, chap 1.

<sup>60</sup> Narrative medicine was rarely mentioned in literature prior to the mid-1980s, see Brody’s *Stories of sickness*, chap 1.

<sup>61</sup> David C. Tolley discusses the gaze of Christ in the context of sickness and notes that this gaze is acknowledging of personal value, intimate, communal, and open, in *SJT*, 2008, 61(2), 1158-172.



characterises our encounters with the other, and whether our church processes facilitate the gaze of Christ or the gaze of oppression.

The other pillar of modernity relevant to this lecture is the cult of individualism: an emphasis upon the rational, autonomous subject.<sup>62</sup> Once again we need to take care in interpreting what it means to be made a person in the image of God, and ask our question: what kind of God? McFadyen discusses various 'pathological' views of the Trinity that, combined with cultural individualism, lead to unhelpful metaphysical conclusions. What he describes as 'hard' monotheism is a picture of God as the unmoved mover, self-sufficient in every way; the archetypal individual who is all-powerful but untouchable (the 'transcendent watchdog' of Stanley Hauerwas<sup>63</sup>). Relationship then becomes a one-way exercise entirely dictated by God and marked by domination, manipulation, and determinism. On inspection this picture undermines the orthodox Trinity and leaves us not with the dynamic interrelationship of Father, Son and Spirit but with three aspects of the same person. The other extreme pathology is tritheism, in which the Trinity is understood as three separate persons. McFadyen notes that any anthropology developed from pathological models of the Trinity is bound to be an individualism in which each person is closed in on itself, with the reality reduced to a variety of self-referential experiences. One can see aspects of this pathology in some of our culture.

The danger is that cultural pressures can lead us to misinterpret the biblical witness, such that we find justification for our own mis-imagining of God. We are indeed persons in *imago dei* when in fact we have first massaged our image of God so that he does not challenge us — hence my subtitle about subversion, for like all institutional sin, we cannot see it. Positively, within Baptist ecclesiology, we have the potentially dynamic framework with which to hear God in our midst. Sean Winter speaks in his Whitley Lecture of the old Baptist practice of multiple sermons on a passage and the possibility of recasting that in a modern understanding of what it is to be the covenanted interpretive community: that together, as God's people and in the power of the

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<sup>62</sup> Persons can be individuals in their uniqueness without being pathologically individualistic.

<sup>63</sup> Hauerwas, *God, medicine and suffering*, p 60.

Spirit, we will actually hear the Word in the rich variety of our interpretations. In the listening to and sharing of stories; in the holding of our calling to be cross-bearers; and in the margins of society, we can find meaning and truth.

We have spoken of the transformative power of the gospel story and this is surely one possible understanding of *metanoia*, the changing of the mind, the new way of seeing. The baptismal testimony is a clear example of *metanoia*: the changing of the candidate's mind about the person of Christ and the resulting challenge to his or her life; or, alternatively expressed, the taking up of the cross (and the very image of taking up the cross indicates the beginning of a process, not an end in itself). This process is patterned on the experience of the early church: that reflection upon the story of the cross-bearing, crucified and resurrected Christ transformed the lives of those who were open to dialogue. No less important are the ongoing experiences of *metanoia* that characterise any Christian life. This is about recognising that taking up the cross means openness to God's address and to the address of others, or could be expressed as a commitment to interpreting the Word in the context of the times within the covenant community. Richard Niebuhr talks of *metanoia* as the process of making the step from hearing about Christ to knowing him as Christ; moving from 'observer' to 'participant'; or making the external story the internal story.<sup>64</sup>

If this process is redemption, or *metanoia*, then we can also conceive of the other process of sin, or *hamartia*, literally 'missing the mark'. This is the failure of dialogue; the unheard or uncommunicated story. In practice, this becomes the dismissal of the other or the failure to trust the other, God or human; the wrong use of power, either as perpetrator or victim.<sup>65</sup> Above all we could characterise sin as the refusal to change,

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *The meaning of revelation*, p 149.

<sup>65</sup> The concept of victim is interesting but there is not sufficient room to explore it here. René Girard's theory of mimetic violence (see *The scapegoat*) may cast light on our group tendencies to isolate and blame scapegoats, often those who are different in some way, to deal with suppressed corporate violence. It is possible, if distasteful, that disabled persons fulfil such a social function. Steve Finamore's Whitley Lecture of 2001 discusses Girardian theory.

the refusal of *metanoia*, the refusal to allow the gospel to challenge and transform.<sup>66</sup> As Jesus said in the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew, ‘I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me’ (Matthew 25:42-43).

### 5. *Suffering persons*

We have been exploring the idea that one way of describing suffering is to be excluded wholly or in part from the dialogue that forms us as persons. This exclusion may be either an impaired call or an impaired response. We have also investigated the idea that the body of Christ is the place in which stories can be formed and transformed, by one another and by God. This process is open, dynamic and equitable, and the Baptist congregational practice of ‘seeking the mind of Christ’ offers a promising model through which to explore it — if we can retain our awareness of the extent to which we are imbedded in our culture.

Western postmodern culture offers a particular challenge to persons who are disabled, who cannot embody the degree of independence and utilitarianism that is considered as normal. Materially, such persons are classed as net consumers, parasitical beings compared with the presumed norm of a balance of production and consumption for each individual. Gerard Loughlin comments that as the religious grand narratives lost their credibility, the modern world began to tell grand narratives about science instead of God. However, these new stories are also undesirable, especially in an eschatological sense, and so we make up our own small stories at will. ‘Today we tell one story and tomorrow we tell another’.<sup>67</sup> Such a context is, however, resistant to the dialogical ideal of equal but interdependent storytelling that we have been considering, and therefore instead forms a nexus for suffering. On the cross Jesus’s experience was of abandonment both by his friends and by God himself: he was unable to be heard, or to receive God’s address. Instead, the narratives of the Jews and Romans dominated the events of

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<sup>66</sup> Sebastian Moore, *Let this mind be in you*, p 81.

<sup>67</sup> Loughlin, *Telling God’s story*, p 9.

Calvary: in Girardian terms, Jesus became the scapegoat—isolated, victimised, the focus of violence and, above all, innocent of any wrongdoing. In such a position, one's voice is silenced.

Dorothee Soelle has offered a helpful threefold analysis of the process of suffering: she identifies distinct phases of (i) mute pain-bearing; (ii) the articulation of pain; and finally (iii) transformation. Does this help us in our consideration of disability? I think that it does, since it expands our understanding of the narrative/dialogue conception of the person with which we have been working.

Soelle explains that deep *suffering initially strikes us dumb*. 'There are forms of suffering that reduce one to a silence in which no discourse is possible any longer, in which a person ceases reacting as a human agent... Extreme suffering turns a person in on himself completely; it destroys his ability to communicate... The weight of unbearable suffering makes us feel totally helpless; we are stripped of the autonomy to think, speak, and act'.<sup>68</sup> The loss of dialogue and narrative strips us of our humanity. We cannot exist in this isolation: Soelle says that we either repress such suffering, which will lead to apathy or, alternatively, self-destruction; or we begin to work on the suffering, to give it meaning.

Soelle's second phase is *articulation of the suffering*, finding a language to 'lead out' of the pain. The language used might be factually descriptive, but more commonly takes the form of lament, an expression of inner despair and raw emotion. Once the pain is expressed, it is also 'out there', and the first step towards dialogue has been taken: 'Without the capacity to communicate with others there can be no change. To become speechless, to be totally without any relationship, that is death'.<sup>69</sup> We are, however, mindful that dialogue has two parts: expression and reception, and we do not have autonomy over both. Jean Vanier notes that in the L'Arche communities, the cry of pain stirs up a variety of emotions in those who hear it. Some run away; some become angry; some discover compassionate response and begin to recognise their own brokenness.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, pp 68-69.

<sup>69</sup> Soelle, *ibid*, p 76.

<sup>70</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and growth*, pp 98-99.

The third phase is that of *transformation*. Soelle describes it this way: ‘The way leads out of isolated suffering through communication (by lament) to the solidarity in which change occurs’.<sup>71</sup> She notes that there may be several aborted movements between the stages of lament and of transformation — change is difficult, but the process at least begins to lead the sufferer out of communicative isolation.

One of the great difficulties that Soelle identifies in western society is the existence of apathy, which literally means ‘freedom from suffering’ (from the Greek, *apatheia*).<sup>72</sup> Since suffering clearly is not absent from our culture, she interprets apathy as the lack of awareness of one’s own suffering, or the inability to empathise with another’s suffering: ‘Christianity has become a stranger to pain’.<sup>73</sup> She attributes this development to modernity with its goal of control: so anxious are we to avoid suffering that our potentially dangerous human relationships shrivel. We justify our desire to avoid suffering, Soelle says, because of our identification with the remote God of traditional hard theism in whose image we believe we are made — our stories are nested within this story. In such a model, where God is Almighty, Lord, King, and Judge, suffering is perceived as a passing phase in which Christ suffered only for a short time on the cross in his humanity: ‘... the apathetic God has won out over the suffering God’.<sup>74</sup> In short, our willingness to enter dialogue is diminished, and we find that we worship happily the cultural gods of autonomy and individualism, because they do not disturb us.

A picture is emerging of a consensual silence in our culture around suffering itself. Stories of suffering are not told: we diminish or suppress them. Jean Vanier tells of this deeply disturbing experience: ‘I once visited a psychiatric hospital that was a kind of warehouse of human misery. Hundreds of children with severe disabilities were lying, neglected, on their cots. There was a deadly silence. Not one of them was crying. When they realize that nobody cares, that nobody will answer them, children no longer cry. It takes too much energy. We cry

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<sup>71</sup> Soelle, *ibid*, p 74.

<sup>72</sup> Soelle, *ibid*, p 36.

<sup>73</sup> Soelle, *ibid*, p 41.

<sup>74</sup> Soelle, *ibid*, p 43.



out only when there is hope that someone may hear us'.<sup>75</sup> These children had given up crying because there had never been a response: they knew from experience that there was no point in articulation.

Stories of suffering may be unheard because we do not want our fragile peace to be disturbed. We do not want to confess solidarity with the *anawim* because the demands of transformation are too high. In any case, corporately our culture has diluted or rejected the grand narrative that places any obligation to the poor upon us, and the church universal may also have failed in its dissent. The spirit of modernity that we have instead embraced impels us to 'solve the problem' of the *anawim*: but this degrades the dialogue to a monologue by discounting the value of suffering as a part of life: instead suffering becomes an imposition that we feel we should not have to bear, and the value of the suffering person is degraded. When allied further to our particular project of individualism we have the complete misery of having to solve the so-called problem of suffering by ourselves. So, my disabled child is my 'problem' and mine alone. This is indeed the place of abandonment.

The alternative is fully to embrace the crucified Christ: which means that we allow the *anawim* to be equal dialogue partners: 'they' become our community; 'their problem' is our problem. To stand there means that we commit ourselves to the margins of modernism; the place where numerical and influential success is not the most important thing. When churches are being encouraged constantly to be culturally relevant, it is indeed a narrow gate that leads to the Kingdom. We are called as cross bearers to a radical revision of the concept of power and to a denial of the individualism that both preclude true dialogue. When we say together at a dedication service that we share the responsibility for a child, it means no less than this.

Paul Fiddes<sup>76</sup> discusses the idea that the common concept of suffering is embedded in the desire for the world to be 'otherwise'. In the midst of life's confusion and pain we capitulate to a longing for a life of order, peace and security, and then question God because life is not like that. Fiddes points out that we cannot theorise about a different sort of creation where suffering does not happen, because our reality is

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<sup>75</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming human*, p 9.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Fiddes, *The creative suffering of God*, p 115-123.

this world. To talk of ‘otherwise’ logically raises the spectre of capriciousness in God; and questions the necessity of the cross. If the cross exists in all eternity then ‘otherwise’ is nonsense: God would not be able to suffer if creation did not exist, since he would have to cause himself to suffering, and that is also nonsense. To adopt this position is not to say that suffering is good in itself (which is unbiblical and perverse); neither is it moving to an understanding of suffering as punitive, educational, or compassion-inducing, all of which alternatives deny the true nature of suffering and turn it rather into an exercise in some strange school of life skills that God operates from a distance. Rather it is to accept suffering as abandonment — being painfully removed from dialogue — and to move to a new identification of God with us.

The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori developed a theory of suffering as the ‘pain’ of God. His thesis is that God’s love is rooted in God’s pain: this is because God’s unconditional love for us is always met by his necessary wrath at sin, and the result of this insoluble clash is pain: hence the inevitability of the cross.<sup>77</sup> Kitamori believes that suffering finds its meaning when it witnesses to the pain of God, and so those who do not identify with the story of Christ will never be able to rationalise their pain.<sup>78</sup> In this way Julian of Norwich can pray to experience extreme suffering, not from some warped masochism, but because she longs to understand at depth what God has done.<sup>79</sup> We are led to the conclusion that there is a metaphysical necessity about suffering that even God cannot avoid: indeed, it cannot be otherwise. A God who is truly with us will not be immune from that suffering.

We can identify a scriptural pattern, that God does not supernaturally remove suffering but instead equips us to live with it. The gift he gives us is that of dialogical relationship. Thus Adam is given a suitable *helper*, Eve; Noah is placed in the *community* of the ark while the Flood rages; Abraham is given the task of founding a *people of covenant love*

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<sup>77</sup> Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God*, p 23. Kitamori understands God’s immutability as his constant unconditional love for sinners.

<sup>78</sup> Kitamori, *ibid*, p 62.

<sup>79</sup> Julian, *Revelations of divine love*, pp 6-8.

who go on to explore their relationship with God through suffering; Jesus reveals that the *kingdom of God* is inescapably founded upon unconditional love; the apostles continually reflect upon the cross and resurrection to understand the nature of the *church and life together*, as followers of Christ crucified. The biblical narrative is often understood as a progressive revelation of the nature of humanity's relationship with God. If we take this approach, we can find a discernible movement through biblical history from the rejection of suffering (that is initially almost totally identified with punishment) to its complete incorporation in Christ (albeit misunderstood by his followers both then and now). When we identify with this incorporation — or when we allow the transforming narrative of scripture to interact with our community and personal narratives—we undergo *metanoia*: indeed, we have our minds renewed.<sup>80</sup>

If we examine the story of suffering in the book of Job we find the same overall movement. Job initially relates his (undoubtedly extreme) suffering to himself: he speaks of his innocence and incomprehension and can see no future for himself, ultimately wishing for death. His wife and friends concur, urging him to curse God and die — but Job will not impugn his creator (although the writer of the story clearly tells us that God gives permission for Job's pain, even if he does not personally inflict it). Instead Job dialogues first with Elihu and then with God and begins to see that he will never make sense of his suffering on a personal level. It is an issue of cosmic proportion. Finally Job begins to understand his solidarity with all others who suffer and in this finds his meaning — and his healing.

If we think of this movement in terms of the hearing of stories then Job's first three dialogue partners, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, initially share Job's mute phase and no-one says a word for seven days (Job 2:11-13). This is a true equity of 'silent dialogue'.<sup>81</sup> Then they begin to make long speeches about God's righteousness, implying Job's guilt

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<sup>80</sup> For example: Romans 12:2 '... be transformed by the renewing of your mind'; Ephesians 4:23, '... be made new in the attitude of your minds' (NIV).

<sup>81</sup> See Tolley, who identifies the withholding of words as part of the 'gaze of Christ', p 171.

before a holy God: in a fruitless search for an explanation. This development does not comfort Job at all, and we can see in it the distortion of true dialogue since the (healthy) friends impose their views rather than listening to Job (who is afflicted) properly. When these friends finally have nothing more to say, and Elihu begins to speak (chapter 32), the dialogue takes a different turn, since Elihu is less conscious of looking for blame. Eventually Job begins to converse with God in an extended lament (chapter 38), followed by a phase of truly hearing the address of God to him. Job is never given an explanation of his trials in terms of cause and effect, but he begins to understand his suffering in terms of a universal human condition, and he begins to understand himself as a person addressed by God. In the final phase of his suffering (chapter 42) Job undergoes a transformation (his mind is renewed with respect to his relationship with God): and he is healed – and most importantly, his inner, primary, healing occurs prior to the restoration of his material wellbeing. The transcendent metanarrative shapes the internally nested personal story.

Job makes a spiritual journey in which meaning is primarily found in the address of God to him rather than in the cessation of his physical and material suffering. He finds ultimate meaning in relationship with God. This view of suffering is exactly that pictured for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Suffering is by no means meaningless, but it cannot wholly be explained causally; and suffering is made worse by isolation (whether actual physical isolation, or social and intellectual isolation). Suffering is relieved by entering into a true dialogue, not by the suffering being removed. This is the role of the Christian community: to hear and to hold the story and to engage in an undistorted dialogue with those who suffer. Such a dialogue will be one that resists abusive and judgemental power (although it does not mean agreeing with everything!); which neither dominates nor ignores; and which is open to the address of God: which we call seeking the mind of Christ.

## 6. Summary

We began with some comments upon Christ's call to bear a cross, and noted the radical and marginal nature of this call in the midst of consumerism, for what does it mean in practice?

It means that we are able to hold suffering: not as a problem to be escaped, but as a part of the fullness of life to which we are called as followers of the crucified and risen Christ. The embrace of suffering, which is without apparent result, is alien to our modern and materialist worldview and will relegate us to the margins: but only by embracing it can we reach the *anawim*.<sup>82</sup> We are to give space without judgement for people to be mute, to articulate and to be transformed. In other words: we are to be a people who understand suffering and do not simply try to get rid of it or label it as meaningless.

It means that we grasp our fundamental need of one another and of God in the project of personhood. This corporate commitment is alien to the individualism and autonomy that have become the gods of modernity and postmodernity: but in the Baptist church we believe that together we can seek the mind of Christ: we can expose ourselves to the transforming narrative of scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we value our church gatherings as God-given places of 'multilogue', in which to seek truth as a dynamic and ever-contemporary process.

It means that our measure of the value and worth of persons is not by their material usefulness or productivity, but by their presence as dialogue partners. In other words, the disabled person who has impaired mobility or cognitive ability or sensory perception is not excluded just because it is too expensive or too much trouble to include them.

It means that we place a high value on our dialogues with one another, and that we recognise that none of us is exonerated from a responsibility for justice and love, because we are all in dialogue all the time. Likewise, we can easily become culpable: not for nothing are we warned (James 3, Proverbs 15) about the dangers of the tongue and the damage we can do to another by distorted dialogue. In other words, we

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<sup>82</sup> Soelle notes that only those who are suffering really want to relieve suffering for others. *Suffering*, p xx.



understand the importance of our relationships and seek to listen, to speak, and to be silent.

In closing, I would like to share my own attempt at articulation, a lament for my disabled daughter Flora.

**Lament for Flora**

Sometimes you are so beautiful:  
smile of trapped sunshine,  
grey-green eyes wide to the world;  
but you will never say, 'I love you, Mummy',  
never run to greet me.  
Often, you don't even hear me coming.  
My joy in your growing  
is spoiled by the thin, spidery legs,  
and the cold inwardness as one therapy follows another  
and none of them makes you whole.  
The thrill as you walked down the garden  
just another picture in the album.  
Bound by your chair for years,  
there are days when my back screams for mercy,  
and my mind is a desert of grief  
for all that you are not.

For me, the crucifixion is every Christmas, at the school nativity;  
every spring, in the dance and song;  
every summer, when you sit no exams;  
every holiday when you cannot run into the sparkling sea;  
every party to which you are not invited.  
There are a thousand crucifixions and I attend them all;  
and I cannot begin to think of the ones that are known only to you.

O God, who was crucified in Christ,  
like Job, I will not curse your name,  
and I know that I will never fully understand  
the bittersweetness of it all.  
So, take me instead on the journey of compassion  
that leads to your very heart.

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