Suffering and Hope

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Reflections in a Time of Wars, Enmities, and Seasons of Festivals of Light offered by members of ICCJ's Theology Committee.

In one of our monthly Zoom meetings of the Theology Committee of the International Council of Christians and Jews, the conversation focused on the tragedies continuing to unfold around the world. We asked ourselves, how can we celebrate the forthcoming feasts of Hanukkah and Christmas in the midst of such global suffering? That led each of us to offer these reflections from our respective Jewish and Christian perspectives, entitled, “Suffering and Hope: Reflections in a time of Wars, Enmities and Seasons of Festivals of Light.”

(Michael Trainor; Chair of the ICCJ Theology Committee. December, 2024)

Dr Debbie Weissman

An Orthodox Jewish Perspective from Israel

I had a teacher and mentor once who became my colleague and friend. He once criticized a statement that is often used by Jews who are paying a condolence call. They say to the mourners, “May you know no more sorrow.” He said: “Living as a human being involves knowing sorrow.”

There are some religious traditions in which suffering plays a central theological role. I think that in my own understanding of Judaism, suffering and sorrow are part of life, but they are not “the bottom line”. Life is about having been created in the Divine Image and having been entrusted with commandments towards our Creator and Creation, towards our fellow human beings, and towards society. We are challenged to leave the world just a little better than it was when we came into it. Part of the role of religious faith in the world is to create ways for people to work together on doing this. If we do our part, there is hope that additional resources and help will come from God, who is both transcendent and immanent.

Until October 7, 2023, I knew that many people throughout history and throughout the world had suffered far more than I. I can’t really say that suffering was part of my existential experience. It is now, albeit vicariously. But the situation in the Middle East and some other parts of the world has become so fraught and precarious that it is difficult not to sink into despair. I know that despair is not a good plan for action. I try to cling to certain things that give me some measure of hope: family gatherings, our community, friendships, films, poetry, music, humor and in Israel, the strength of our protest movement. I think that another role for religion is to help people face life’s challenges with hope.

Dr Celia Deutsch NDS

A Catholic Christian Perspective from the USA

No life is exempt from some degree of suffering, including innocent suffering. There is personal suffering: loss of loved ones, poverty, illness, fear of civil authorities and deportation. And there is collective suffering. The events of recent years such as October 7 and the global surge of

antisemitic manifestations, the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, the wars in Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere, catastrophic climate events are inflicting suffering on a global, mass scale. All of us are impacted in one degree or another, directly or indirectly.

At this time of the year, Christians of many denominations, including my own Roman Catholic tradition, are observing the season of Advent, approximately four weeks of preparation for the feast of Christmas on December 25. While the commercialization of the season in many Christian-dominated lands sometimes obscures the profound significance of Advent and Christmas, I find in the symbols and the story of Christmas, a resource of hope in the midst of suffering and chaos.

Advent rituals and symbols readings can be problematic. Lectionary selections from the Hebrew Bible are often interpreted in a supersessionist manner, as being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, rather than from their own context in Israelite and Judean history, Thus, Jer 23:5-8 is understood to predict Jesus as the king in the text, rather than a post-exilic Judean ruler, a descendent of David. Isa 40:1-11 is interpreted as referring to the message of John the Baptist and the coming messianic era, rather than seen in its context as a promise of return from Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Seen in their actual social and historical backgrounds, however, these texts take on greater power as messages of hope for new life, for social, political and cosmic transformation, as well as challenges to conversion of heart.

I often find myself turning to the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, often called the “infancy narrative”. (Luke has his own infancy narratives in the first two chapters of his Gospel.) These texts give us Matthew’s version of Jesus’ genealogy, and a series of reflective accounts of Jesus’ conception, birth and infancy. In the opening verse of his gospel, Matthew calls Jesus “the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham”. In a dream vision Joseph is told to name the child “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” and he is told that the child will be called “Emmanuel” (1:23). This child, in other words, will be of royal descent, the Messiah, the descendant of Abraham the patriarch in whom all nations of the earth are blessed (Gen 12:3). And this child will be hunted by Herod, and will finally die at the hand of another Roman ruler, Pilate, crucified as an insurrectionist and royal pretender – “King of the Jews” (Matt 27:11, 37).

Written in the late first century, Matthew’s infancy narratives are full of social and political significance. Jerusalem and the Temple have fallen. Many Judeans have either been taken into exile or have fled to cities around the Mediterranean. The Jewish literature of the late first and early second centuries, as well as many of the New Testament texts, reflect a sense that the world has come apart. There is a profound search for meaning, and a corresponding call to repentance. There is also the hope of a new order of things, a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. This literature, including Matthew’s Gospel, is written against the backdrop of the Roman empire. It promises another kind of rule, with God as King; it not only challenges audiences to repentance, but shows concrete ways in which to live under the divine rule.

That rule reverses usual expectations of power and status. A child who is Messiah and Son of David is born into an artisan family (see Matt 13:55), forced to flee death at the hands of a king who is a client of Rome, and is taken with his mother by Joseph into exile in Egypt until such time that they can return, but even then only to the Galilean backwater town of Nazareth, not to a political or cultural center. This is Emmanuel, God-with-us. This gives me hope – that God is with us in the unexpected, in chaos and persecution and political upheaval and homelessness, that God is with us in failure and disgrace, in the face of political, military, social and climate threat. Matthew’s naming of Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us, tells me that in Jesus, God has made all that suffering God’s own.

In these times I draw hope from that promise. I draw courage in the face of the enormous social and political challenges present in so many of our countries, including the seemingly intractable war in Israel and Gaza. Recent U.S. elections threaten many of us in this country, most especially

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the vulnerable (the elderly and poor, the immigrants and minorities). The antisemitism, racism and islamophobia that occurs in times of social and political upheaval will only intensify. Yet the promise of Advent and Christmas remains. The hope offered us in the promise that God is with us is embodied in the lives of so many people who cross the boundaries of race, class, religion and language to stand in solidarity with one another. That solidarity is an embodied promise of a new way of living.

Rev. Patrick Morrow

An Anglican Christian Perspective from the UK

Optimism is not a Christian virtue. We are not called to believe that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, whatever Voltaire may have thought. Christians come in all possible personality-types. A sunny disposition can be a good, encouraging thing to have. But it is not required. When people feel distress, dislocation, or depression, biblical language of “joy” - as itself something commanded - can hit hard. I believe the idea is we are called to be oriented towards joy, to prepare a place for it, when it becomes manifest.

All of this is to the good, of course. These are not days for optimism. The fitting Christian virtue is hope, and in particular that kind of hope which is called “hope against hope”, which goes back to Paul speaking of Abraham’s hope for progeny, when all optimism had long drained away (Rom 4:18, par’elida ep’elpidi). This is hope for the future, based on hope already placed in God. But why place confidence in God, if all the evidence of good “Providence” is ambiguous at the very best?

In many Christian liturgies, the reading you absolutely must have on Christmas Day is actually not one that mentions shepherds, wise men, or angels; it is the Prologue to John, including the words: “the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5). The whole season of Advent – which can be smothered by early observance of Christmas excesses – is designed as, inter alia, a reflection on light in darkness. The resonances with Hanukkah are obvious. The light is flickering, feeble, vulnerable, volatile. But (and!) it is there. Some argue that to say “the Light shines in the darkness” is performative language: saying it makes it so. I would not want to commit to that understanding. But it is not a bad place to begin.

There are forms of Christianity where it can seem that suffering is itself seen as an intrinsic good. To suffer is (again, intrinsically) to draw close to God, to share in Jesus Christ’s suffering. I think that is a misreading. Remember how Jesus Christ is described as healer. Through him, supremely, it is held that life comes out of death. Suffering, then, is more an inevitable part of a life lived in the adventure of love. It is love that is the intrinsic good. Love here is not an emotion, so much as a kind of attention and commitment. We attend to what (who) is there, without delusion, without pretence, without naivety, and – always – without despair. The images of a light shining in the darkness, or of all the hopes and fears that follow a new birth and focus on it, can serve us all.

Rev. Dr Michael Trainor

A Catholic Christian Perspective from Australia

I am aware of the suffering that surrounds my world, especially Jewish friends who live in Israel and in my home country, Australia. The global suffering and surge in political tensions with the increasing rise in nationalism and antisemitism is accompanied by fear, frustration and a sense of hopelessness by those with whom I talk. This year has been very difficult at so many levels. As a Christian moving towards Christmas, I ask: what can this Christian feast mean for me now amid a world of suffering and shattered dreams?

In contrast, I am also surrounded by festive images and joy filled advertisements urging people to purchase and enjoy this “happy time”. Such cultural images belie the suffering of our/my world. They seem to offer a veneer that glosses over the real suffering that many in my world experience. So how can I bring the Feast into authentic dialogue with my world as it is, and not as it is commercially portrayed?

There are two stories in the Gospels that are my focus for our worship liturgy. Both were written about two to three generations after the story they depict with Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke has Jesus born in Bethlehem, the town associated with King David. After his birth he is wrapped “in bands of cloth” and “laid in a manger”. The context of Jesus’ birth in Luke’s Gospel is set within the hegemony of Roman imperialism. The parents are forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted for taxation purposes. Luke’s story is thus set within imperial politics and economic exploitation. The imagery of “cloth” and “manger” symbolise Jesus’ link to Earth, an association that will unfold in the rest of the Gospel. His ministry will seek freedom for God’s holy, downtrodden and unimportant ones.

Matthew’s Gospel offers a different perspective on Jesus’ birth, as Celia Deutch also writes. Its Jewishness is palpable as astronomers and star watchers follow a star that leads them to Jerusalem, to Herod and his advisers who consult the Jewish Scriptures to interpret the stars’ meaning and direct them to the place, the “house”, of Jesus’ birth, as with Luke, also in Bethlehem. Political jealousy and savage machinations from Herod surround this child’s birth. His family is forced to flee, like Jacob’s family, to relative safety in Egypt. Suffering and the death of the innocent surround this child’s story.

Both Gospels provide a context for contemporary Christians to remember the poor, the suffering, the exploited, and those killed by unjust and savage agents of imperialism and control. Jesus’ birth story, whether from Luke or Matthew, invite Christians to remember the dark underside of a world of suffering, death and destruction. Jesus, God’s agent and revealed presence, born in these circumstances as depicted by Luke and Matthew, affirms God’s solidarity with the suffering. This presence, God’s revealed presence, offers hope in the midst of tragedy.
While Christmas is a time of celebration with family and friends and gift-giving, it can and must be a very different Christmas. It must be a time of communion with the innocent who cruelly suffer.

Dr Pavol Bargár

A Protestant Christian Perspective from the Czech Republic

Christmas is hardly the time of the year when most people would (like to) reflect on suffering, not least in a culture that does its utmost to suppress any thought of pain, loss, despair, and discomfort. At the same time, however, as people of faith (or no faith) who seek to act responsibly vis-à-vis others and the world, we are challenged not to turn a blind eye to social and economic injustice, oppression and exploitation, wars and persecution, psychological and sexual abuse, ecological and cultural degradation – in short, the brokenness of creation that we are part of. But what are constructive and unpretentious ways to respond responsibly through our reflection and action? To put it differently, where to find hope amidst suffering? Hope as something which remains after optimism, enthusiasm, and cheap grace have evaporated. Hope as a resolute commitment to join, no matter how modestly, in God’s work of transforming creation.

As a practicing Christian and theologian, I have been throughout this Advent season inspired by the passage from Luke’s gospel that is commonly referred to as Mary’s Song of Praise, or Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). Though much can be (and has been) written about this beautiful scripture, I will limit myself to three brief points here. First, Mary’s Song highlights the significance of “little narratives,” the stories of “ordinary” folks. It shows that the God of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth

is a God who does not present Godself in the limelight but acts on the periphery of Empire – amidst marginalization, trivialization, and suffering. Second, for me, this text is not primarily about obedience. Conventionally, based on this and the previous passages from Luke's Gospel (see Lk 1:38), Mary has been portrayed as a prime example of unconditional submission to God's will. However, when we read the Magnificat closely, we see that it is loaded with a potential for social and political relevance. Our established understandings of power and social status are turned upside down. Those who are hungry will be fed – nay, the conditions will be altered so that they can feed themselves. Finally, this passage – as so many other biblical texts! – gives rise to an anti-fatalistic view of reality. It represents a robust protest against any form of life-suffocating givenness. The Jewish maiden becomes an agent of change. The improbable is turned into possible, and a hope for transformation emerges.

Now, I am aware that I write these lines from a position of privilege, relatively devoid of suffering. That is why I try to do my best constantly to keep in mind - and stand in solidarity with - all those who in their suffering keep their hope alive. The story of Mary, and the stories of many other, often nameless, agents of hope, help me on my journey.

Rabbi Guillermo Bronstein

A Progressive Jewish Perspective from Peru

When the renowned British historian Arnold Toynbee called Judaism a "fossil of history," the Jewish-American thinker Jacob Agus (today sadly forgotten) responded by pointing out that Judaism was a civilization (a concept coined by another 20th century thinker: Mordecai Kaplan); just like the six great civilizations that Toynbee had highlighted throughout the historical eras. The difference between Judaism and other civilizations does not lie in the level of fossilization, but in that it has some different characteristics:

- The religious factor, although not the only one, is the essential one in Jewish civilization.
- Jewish history is not composed, like that of other civilizations, of an awakening, an ascension that leads to decline and final disappearance, but of successive awakenings, falls, and a return to prominence in another part of the world and in other circumstances.
- Agus called this phenomenon the sinusoidal line of Jewish history.

Thus we can paraphrase Agus's idea by saying that Jewish history is a succession of greatness, decline, and suffering. The most remarkable thing about these periods of unspeakable suffering (we can multiply the examples in dozens of persecutions, massacres, and expulsions) did not leave in the spirit of the victims and persecuted only pain and suffering; but they were at the same time a spark of resilience and hope. The messianic idea, that of a king who would represent in his person and figure all the promises that God had made to the Patriarchs, was born from a chain of disastrous events: defeats, destruction, exiles. In this sense, I would like to highlight the factor of hope that these ideas of redemption and a prosperous future have. Thus, the contemporary American historian Steven Bayme tells us that Jewish messianism contains three elements: the messianic idea; messianic movements; and messianic calculations.

- Messianic calculations were always wrong and led to enormous unrest and bitterness.
- Messianic movements only brought more division within the people and persecutions.
- But the messianic idea, which is what we must highlight, was one of the few elements in the history of the Jewish people that was able to transform pain into but a part of life, and suffering into hope.

Source: ICCJ.