

Back in the mid-late 1980s, when I was a teenager, the Archbishop of Canterbury sent a special envoy to Beirut to negotiate the release of British hostages being held there. This was right in the middle of what would later be known as the Lebanese Hostage Crisis. The envoy, Terry Waite had secured the release of a number of hostages over the previous few years and as a representative of the Church of England, it was hoped he would safely do the same thing on this mission. Instead, Terry Waite was himself kidnapped. He would go on to spend almost 5 years in captivity, most of them in complete darkness, and entirely alone. While he was imprisoned, he was beaten and tortured, physically and mentally, he was chained up and left with nothing at all to engage his mind. He had no access to the outside world and no idea from day to day what his fate would be. His is an excruciating story of quite incredible solitary suffering, and yet, he would share in interviews after his release, during his time in captivity, his faith in God was unshaken.

During these same years, the mid-ish 1980s, I was lucky enough to meet with, and hear first-hand testimony from a number of Polish holocaust survivors. These folks had survived heinous atrocities, witnessed and experienced unspeakable brutality and heart-rending grief. Incredibly, for some, these experiences deepened and strengthened their faith in God, despite the years of punishing violence and mental cruelty, and the belief that they themselves would never make it out alive.

These stories fascinated me. As a teenager, I was well-aware of the often-asked question “How could God let this happen?” There seemed to be two usual ways of answering, either that suffering is, somehow, punishment for something bad we’ve done in the past, or, quite simply, terrible suffering like this proves that God doesn’t exist. I realize now, in a way I didn’t then, how this question and these two possible answers are entirely dependent on a particular theology.

As a teenager, I was confidently striding into atheism, confidently and quite happily detaching myself from the meaninglessness of the Christianity I encountered as a child. I was handed a theology with an omnipotent, mighty, and demanding, and usually quite grumpy God, at its center. A God who saw everything, judged everything ... a God who rewarded and blessed the good and punished and made the bad suffer. God was kinda caricatured as a very powerful, all-controlling ruler-type, much like the Emperors or Kings deep in the cultural dna of the England that raised me. This is what I was rejecting, theology like this – but at the time it was Christianity that had to go because I didn't know anything of theology, or that there were any other theologies to explore.

For every Terry Waite, and for every handful of Holocaust survivors who made it through suffering and stress perhaps because of their faith, there are many, many more whose faith is blown to bits when life tests it in extreme ways.

Theology matters, our theology matters, because theology is the way we organize our thinking about God, so we might get closer to the life-giving divine truth, so we might know true freedom and be transformed by our understanding. Whatever life's circumstances, God **is**, but if the ideas we hold about God are insufficient or flimsy, they'll not stand up to great pressure, they'll crack and fall away and we can find ourselves adrift in meaninglessness. As I certainly did for many, many years.

Our theology matters. Whether we're conscious of it or not, our theology is the lens through which we look at the world. The way we theologically reflect on our lives, the wonderful things, but perhaps especially on our suffering, can lead us toward transformation and ever greater 'freedom,' or it can limit our ability to integrate the truth of God into our own life experience, and keep us trapped in the small, tight

space of surface understanding, which can be all too easily disrupted, all too easily blown to bits.

St. Paul was thrown in prison a lot, and by all accounts his life was one of quite considerable suffering. He wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison. This exquisite letter of love and deep joy in faith was written in the midst of his suffering. Despite his own rather grim circumstances, Paul's Letter to the Philippians radiates the gladness of one who has truly come to know God. Having his liberty taken away is no obstacle to Paul's understanding of true freedom; having his ability to live his worldly life taken away doesn't get in the way of his joy in relationship and community. That's a theology!

The relationship between suffering and faith is an undeniable part of the Christian story. All too often it's framed as some sort of necessary penance for sin, or justified punishment for personal or communal failings. But that's certainly not what's shining through Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Instead, what can be sensed is a refining clarity, a confident theology that's affirmed in his time of suffering when he's able to perceive with great clarity the truth that remains when everything else, when everything has been stripped away. And that, despite his material circumstances – or perhaps because of them – is a source of joy!

If we're not careful, our strong desires for safety and for comfort can distort our theology; if we're not paying attention, our longing for security and keeping control of our lives can unknowingly distort our theology, our fears can unhelpfully be the foundation of our theology.

In his Letter to the Philippians Paul is showing us something else, he's giving voice to the deep joy of knowing the ever-present *is-ness* of God, to be experienced and understood and lived from. This is our true source of life and being; our transient comforts, our times of health or

good fortune, our youth or our wealth – arguably this all might actually get in the way of our understanding of God, might get in the way of a confident and life-affirming theology.

I absolutely do not believe suffering is necessary to come to know God, and I hope we none of us ever know the kind of extreme suffering lived through by Terry Waite or by St. Paul. But without doubt, there will be times in our lives when we are in pain and when we will look for God. Times of suffering when we might fall into the trap of asking “why?” – why me, why is this happening, where is God, why is God doing this to me?

The way we respond during the hardest times in our lives will reveal the theology that has formed within us during easier times. It will reveal the theology we might have been inherited or soaked up from the culture around us. We may not even realize it's there until it's challenged, until it's tested and needed. But theology matters, our theology matters.

This is a great season to be thinking about theology. We're waiting for the very beginning of the Christian story to begin this year's turn. How might we intentionally re-engage with our story this year? How might we intentionally wrestle with our understanding, with our theology, in new and liberating ways? How might we come to uncouple true and constant joy in God's presence, and the deep peace of God which surpasses all understanding, how might we separate this, meaningfully, from our own unpredictable and utterly changeable life circumstances?

I think, *this* is 'the Way' Jesus came to show us, the Way, the knowing that saves us, and by which we all can come to know deep joy, in freedom, and fullness of life. What do you think? ... because that matters. Our theology matters.