

At most high schools throughout New Zealand students are required to prepare a three to four-minute speech in their Year 9, 10 and 11 English classes. For those of you who were educated in the 20th century, that's third, fourth and fifth form. There are a lot of things I admire about Noah. One of them is that he's unashamedly Christian and so, for the last two years, Noah has used his speech as an opportunity to share his faith with his peers at King's. Last year he talked about the anthropic principle, the idea that there are so many things on planet earth that are so finely tuned that life couldn't have happened by chance but must be the work of an intelligent designer.

This year he talked about reasons why God might allow suffering and he's going to share those with you now.

Each year at King's High School we're expected to write and perform a speech in front of our English class. Over the last two years I have decided to speak on something about Christianity because it motivates me to work hard and share about my faith. This year I decided to speak about how I think a loving God can allow suffering in the world which He created. I decided to speak about this because a lot of non-Christians would struggle to believe in the God Christians believe in because of all the suffering in the world, but also because many Christians turn away from God because of the suffering that occurs on Earth. In fact, in the movie, 'Billy: The Early Years', which we watched recently at church, Billy Graham's friend who was a great Christian preacher turned away from God because of the suffering that occurred in the world during his time. I don't want to see anyone turn away from faith because of this as I believe there are answers as to why our God would allow the suffering. I performed this speech a couple of months ago in class and received good feedback from the class and teacher.

So, how can a loving God allow suffering to continue in the world which He created? This is a question that many Christians, atheists and doubters have pondered for centuries, and is a question that is perhaps the most difficult for Christians to answer. God allowing suffering is one of atheism's best arguments against a loving God, the God Christians believe in. But even for Christians, how can they believe in a 'loving God' when we are all accustomed to hearing of murders, natural disasters, cancer and young children dying. How can a loving God allow this?

Today, I am going to explore different reasons as to why God might allow suffering.

Since the beginning of time, God has given us free will so that we can make our own choices. Free will could be one of the reasons for God allowing suffering. Without free will we are essentially robots, controlled by God without any real leeway to make our own decisions. Without free will there's also no real love. This means that without free will, we would make no conscious decision to become a Christian. Although God longs for people to live for him He loves us so much that He gives us the right to choose. But free will also allows room for evil because we're imperfect. Evil such as bullying, lying and rape are what we're capable of doing because we've been given a choice.

Another possible reason for suffering is Satan. Satan's story goes like this, the Devil was an angel, created by God, gifted with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. The Bible says, 'the thief (Satan) comes only to steal and kill and destroy.' We cannot forget that Satan and his minions are always active and are, in my opinion, most definitely one of the reasons for suffering on Earth.

Christians believe in an eternal God, which means that God has always been in existence, and always will be in existence. So, in comparison to eternity, this life is microscopic, but it is still vitally important. What I believe as a Christian is that one day we will be judged for how we've acted on Earth and whether we've chosen to follow Jesus or not. To get into Heaven, it simply says in the Bible, 'if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' How does this tie into God allowing suffering you may be thinking?

Throughout the Bible, Heaven is described as a beautiful place where followers of Jesus will go and live for eternity. 'He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' That is a description of Heaven from the last book in the Bible, and it sounds to me like no more suffering. Why then, couldn't a loving God allow suffering on Earth so that if we decide on Earth to follow him, we have the eternal blessing of Heaven?

In the Bible there was a young man named Joseph who was famous for his imaginative dreams and colourful coat. Joseph seemed arrogant and was his father's favourite, and his brothers hated him for these things. His brothers hated him so much that they sold Joseph into a life of slavery and misery in Egypt. Though Joseph experienced years of pain, including a long prison sentence, his character was refined and strengthened. He eventually rose to become governor of Egypt and became a very successful leader through saving thousands of lives, as he brought them through a famine.

With time and perspective maybe you could see good reasons for at least some of the tragedy and pain in your life. Why then couldn't it be possible that God allows us to suffer to grow in character and become better people?

I hope that I have revealed some possible reasons for God allowing suffering that you can understand and may even be able to apply to your life. I believe God loves each and every one of us unconditionally, and I also believe that there are legitimate reasons for Him to allow suffering. I want to finish with this, I think there is one large difference between Atheism and Christianity when it comes to suffering on Earth. Atheism has nothing whatsoever to say to a dying child or their parents. Christianity has much to say, and much hope to give!

The reason I wanted our Year 7 to 9 students to listen to that speech is because I want to challenge all our young people to use the opportunity at school to share aspects of their faith through their speeches. It takes a great deal of courage to stand up for Jesus in front of your classmates and an unbelieving teacher, but what a great opportunity to stand out as a Christian at school!

Luke 13:1-9

Today we are confronted with death. There are two certainties in life: death and taxes. Most people avoid both as much as they can.

Today we are confronted by two different kinds of death. One kind is something we're not familiar with as Christians in New Zealand. For some people the second kind is something that is all too familiar.

The Galileans Jesus is told about are victims of religious persecution. Kerre McIvor, who used to host the 8pm to midnight slot on NewsTalk ZB, says anyone born in New Zealand has won genetic Lotto. By that she means that compared to the rest of the world, New Zealand is a clean, green, safe and secure place to live. In the words of the great Kiwi poet, Fred Dagg, we don't know how lucky we are!

Well, as Christians, we've not only won genetic Lotto, we've won Powerball as well. We live in a country that, on the whole, is apathetic about Christianity. From time to time things come to the surface – people like Brian Tamaki and Graham Capill have their fifteen minutes of fame – and social issues like homosexuality bring the beliefs of Christians to the fore but, more often than not, most Kiwis don't give two hoots about Christianity and the church. Apathy, about a lot of things, is a typical Kiwi trait.

While this makes it hard to win people to Christ, would you rather live in a country where people are persecuted for their faith? Would you choose to live in a place where state police would harass you or arrest you if they found you to be in possession of a Bible? Would you prefer to live in fear that, at any time, you or a member of your family could be taken away, never to be seen again?

Other Christians are the victims of unexpected events and this causes us to wonder if we are experiencing God's judgement on us.

Unfortunately, suffering is a natural part of life. Buildings collapse, planes crash, heavy rain and earthquakes cause landslides and floods, terminal illness can strike at any time. Does this mean God is mad at us? No. Emphatically no! If God was to punish us for our sins as they occurred very few of us would get out of childhood.

What it does mean is that we have to develop an understanding of suffering. I agree with everything Noah said but I don't think it's particularly helpful when you're going through a tough time.

You have to develop a theology of suffering when things are going well because, when persecution or tragedy strikes, God will seem very far away, if you even think he exists at all. If your faith isn't big enough, or deep enough, to cope you'll join the hordes of people who walk away from God when things get difficult.

So, neither religious persecution nor tragic unexpected events are brought on by our sin. However, at times like this, when we're aware of suffering and pain, Jesus has a message for us: repent, or you too will perish.

So, what is Jesus saying to you today? Repent. Turn around 180 degrees. Stop living your way and choose to follow me instead. Your life could be taken away from you at any time and if you haven't made your peace with God things will look pretty grim for you! You will cease to exist. There will be no life after this one because you will perish.

Then be baptised. Baptism is a public confession of a private decision. What's stopping you from being baptised? If you've decided to repent you need to be baptised as the next step of obedience.

Baptism may seem like a weird practice but it's not. When the World Cup winning French football team arrived back in Paris from Moscow two weeks ago their plane was sprayed with water as a symbol of victory and celebration.

Baptism with water is a symbol of Jesus's victory over sin and death and a celebration that another person has chosen to follow him. If you have chosen to repent you have to be baptised. It's that simple.

After stating unequivocally that human suffering is not punishment dished out by an angry God Jesus follows up with a parable. The message is this. God has given you, and is giving you, plenty of time to repent. Like the owner of the fig tree God wants to see fruit – he wants people to come to repentance – and he is well within his rights to allow our lives to end at any time. But he doesn't. Because of his mercy, because of his love, because of his grace, God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9b).

According to Jesus, unless you repent you will perish. Elsewhere, Jesus says the penalty for not accepting his offer of forgiveness and reconciliation with God is eternal punishment, so both must be true.

There is a belief out there in the world that, when we die, we go to a better place where we are reunited with the people we love and we watch over those who are still living.

Dad said last week that when people are standing by a hole in the ground that is about to be filled by a coffin there's a lot of belief in a life after this one.

A couple of examples of what people around us believe:

Emotions were running high for All Blacks debutant Karl Tu'inukuafe as he lined up for the national anthem on the hallowed turf of Eden Park.

It only took a few strains of 'God Defend New Zealand' before the tears began to stream down the 24-year-old's face.

But it wasn't so much the occasion that comes with an international debut which got to the Chiefs prop, but something far more sentimental.

'I was just thinking about my grandparents and wishing they were here to see it,' Tu'inukuafe told media. 'I know they're looking down on me.'

Example Two: In 1995 a song called *One Sweet Day* was released by Mariah Carey and the Rhythm & Blues group Boyz II Men. Let's look at the first verse and the chorus:

Sorry I never told you
All I wanted to say
Now it's too late to hold you
'Cause you've flown away
So far away

And I know you're shining down on me from heaven
Like so many friends we've lost along the way
And I know eventually we'll be together
One sweet day

I want to contrast those beliefs by reading you some thoughts of Tim Keller. I'm reading from his book, *The Reason for God*, at the end of a chapter titled, *How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?*

During my college years and my early twenties I, like so many others, questioned the Christian faith I was raised in. There were subjective reasons for my doubts. Christianity just didn't seem real to me experientially. I had not developed a prayer life and had never experienced God personally. There were also intellectual problems I was having with Christianity, all of which I am addressing elsewhere in this book. There was one; however, I will talk about here.

I was troubled by those Christians who stressed hellfire and damnation. Like so many of my generation I believed that, if there was a core to all religions, it was a loving God. I wanted to believe in a God of love who accepted people regardless of their beliefs and practices. I began to take courses in the other major religions of the world – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism and Judaism. I have profited to this day from those studies. However, my explorations in other faiths proved me wrong on this particular point about the centrality of a loving God.

I found no other religious text outside of the Bible that said God created the world out of love and delight. Most ancient pagan religions believed the world was created through struggles and violent battles between opposing gods and supernatural forces. I turned to look more closely at Buddhism, the religion I liked best at the time. However, despite its great emphasis on selflessness and detached service to others, Buddhism did not believe in a personal God at all, and love is the action of a person.

Later on, after I became a minister, I was a speaker and panellist for several years in a monthly discussion programme in Philadelphia between a Christian church and a mosque. Each month a speaker from the church and a speaker from the mosque would give a biblical and Qu'ranic perspective on a topic. When we covered the topic of God's love, it was striking how different our conceptions were. I was told repeatedly by Muslim speakers that God was indeed loving in the sense of being merciful and kind to us. But when Christians spoke of the Lord as our spouse, of knowing God intimately and personally, and of having

powerful effusions of his love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, our Muslim friends balked. They told us that it was disrespectful, in their view, to speak of anyone knowing God personally.

Today many of the sceptics I talk to say, as I once did, they can't believe in the God of the Bible, who punishes and judges people, because they 'believe in a God of Love'. I now ask, what makes them think God is Love? Can they look at life in the world today and say, 'This proves that the God of the world is a God of Love'? Can they look at history and say, 'This all shows that the God of history is a God of Love'? Can they look at the religious texts of the world and conclude that God is a God of Love? By no means is that the dominant, ruling attribute of God as understood in any of the major faiths. I must conclude that the source of the idea that God is Love is the Bible itself. And the Bible tells us that the God of Love is also a God of judgement who will put all things in the world to rights in the end.

The belief in a God of pure love – who accepts everyone and judges no one – is a powerful act of faith. Not only is there no evidence for it in the natural order, but there is almost no historical, religious textual support for it outside of Christianity. The more one looks at it, the less justified it appears.

Reflection:

Luke 13:1-9

13 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'

⁶ Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

⁸ "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

As a result of reflecting on this passage today:

I am going to pray for and give to persecuted Christians around the world through Voice of the Martyrs.
www.vom.org.nz

I am going to develop a theology of suffering so that, when tough times come, as they inevitably do, I will be able to stand firm.

I am going to repent.

I am going to be baptised.

'Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.'

Bob Pierce

Founder of World Vision