

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Let Them Both Grow

“Why does God tolerate evil?” How often I hear that question...or suspect it’s being asked silently, beside a hospital bed, in a deserted family home, in the heart of a devastated child. Let me add a further question: *Why does God tolerate me?* The two questions are one, and the second, if it doesn’t precisely answer the first, certainly draws some of the acid from it. We think we know what’s evil: *everything that annoys or pains us.* We can see no good reason for the world to contain those things. But we ourselves are almost certainly of their number, in someone else’s book; most of us, surely, appear to someone sometime as one of God’s mistakes, without which the world would be a better place. When we self-righteously arraign God for permitting evil, we have forgotten his immense charity towards ourselves. Fortunately God has a different yardstick from ours.

### Is God Never Angry?

Not as we are: helpless and aimless, out of control. Real divine anger is exactly-placed, proportioned, just, and - this is the most important thing - inclusive of the full value of divine forgiveness. God is angry at evil, but not at evil-doers. God never needs to suspend his anger, as I do mine, by a great act of self-denial. His mercy is as much natural to him as his hatred of suffering and sin.

### Can We Look With God’s Eyes?

The truth is, that I’ve got it all round my neck. My anger is muddled up with my fear, and my lack of faith, and my pessimistic suspicion that the whole of life can go pear-shaped. Whereas God is never deflected from his certainty, never runs short of his sufficiency, never finds himself challenged or tested even by the worst things we can do. Despite everything, God still finds us as needful, as attractive a component of his cosmos (once he’s decided to make a cosmos), as on the day he first freely chose to give us life. His purposes for us still remain the great possibility, the perfect option for us. The angry, hating, punishing person I can sometimes be is far from the person God wanted to create. In the end, I myself deserve the responses I am ready to visit on others; and yet God never deserts the hope that guided him in my making. He has a divine plan for me. That is why he ignores my destructive approach to his creation. It is, therefore, the work of grace to

become obedient to what God has made, and to live with the fact that God is the Creator, not I. The moment we realise this, we can start losing anxiety. We don’t have to justify ourselves, or anyone else. We are as God made us, and any complaints belong before God. (One soon tires of complaining to God about his actions. Such impulses are inevitably the prelude to a further conversion on our part, not on God’s.)

### Tolerance – virtue or vice?

If we tolerate evil, we can be accused of treachery to our good principles. Catholic bishops, for instance, tolerated Hitler in pre-war Germany, and today stand notoriously accused of criminal complicity. On the other hand, if we visit our wrath on the evil which is undoubtedly around us, and crush all those we judge to be sinners, we find ourselves more stringent than God, who is so very sparing in the thunderbolt department. Is there a sort of tolerance that is proper for us? Firstly, God is the judge, and our grasp on his justice is fallible, thus a dangerous guide. Secondly, Jesus *allowed* the force of evil to take him into its power, forbidding the taking of the sword in his defence. To Peter’s utter incomprehension (*I do not know the man*) he lets himself be condemned, not because his enemies have judged correctly, but because he is obeying a truth deeper than the one they obey: the will of the Father. They convict him of claiming divine authority. He can’t deny it: *that is precisely what he is doing.* In their condemnation, they rob him of everything earthly; they reveal in him the heavenly dignity they wanted to deny him. Knowing this, Jesus gladly allows them to rob him of earthly life and honour, even willingly laying them down. Thus he teaches the truth of the parable in today’s Gospel, not uprooting the evil he meets, for fear that the good crop be lost in the process. This is an exercise of power, not an example of weakness. It reveals the divine truth, deeper and higher than the world knows. How can we exercise a similar forbearance with this ignorant world?

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