

**Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy:**  
**The Pastor and the Suffering God**

When I was asked for a provisional theme for this lecture last summer it seemed a long way away – and at that time my mind was occupied with the race to finish a book on the theology of intercession. That race was completed and for the moment at least, if I was to speak to you about it, it would either involve repeating what I have said about it that book (available now from Blackwell's and all good bookshops), or remind me painfully of its inadequacies.

I want instead to move sideways into a related area – hoping not to cause too much disappointment in my listeners. I want to consider the question of human and divine suffering, and I want to consider it as a problem which is pastoral and theological. It is a related area because in mind at least both of these areas are alike considerations of whether God can be affected by humanity. Intercession too is about the passibility of God: whether can be changed by our prayers. For to respond, to 'answer', is to be changed. In *Answering God* I argue that a Trinitarian understanding of God indeed allows – even, compels – us to think in such ways.

One of my prime motives in considering intercession at all was to explore a mystery of Christian devotion and practice. I tried to approach it not as a philosophical problem but as a pastoral concern: how, and for what, should we pray. The problem of human suffering is self-evidently a problem of pastoral concern also – though I am mindful that the way in which this is often currently configured is somewhat recent, and perhaps, 'western.' The question of God's suffering has also come to be configured as a matter of pastoral theological concern. Reflection on pastoral practice is often held to be

facilitated by theological discussion of the suffering of God. We might frame some of the issues like this:

- Is it helpful for our own suffering is shared in some way by God? Or indeed by another?
- Can we legitimately move from human suffering to predicate certain things of God and divine suffering? If so, how is this move made? What can reflection on human suffering tells us about God?
- How is human suffering altered / transformed by God's relationship to it?
- What is said about the pastoral relationship itself by such understandings of God's (im)passibility? And does the pastoral relationship in turn tell us anything about God?

In the time available this morning I am not going to give a definitive answer to these questions. What I want to do is explore the debate through the lens of a distinctly pastoral theology. Specifically, I want use the thought of one pastor to illumine it, and then, having considered some of the wider contemporary debate, to suggest that that pastor might actually help us to be able to say something about God. This is work that is in its gestation and I will welcome comment and discussion when I have finished my presentation.

The reality of human suffering, in its infinite diversity, presents a Christian pastor with some of his/her most challenging tasks. In the debate the term 'suffering' itself is not always examined or defined, but I'll begin by quoting Roger Hurding's definition – "Suffering is the experience of anguish or misery in which sentient beings are aware of the deprivation of their intent or function." Hurding recognises that suffering is relative to 'circumstances of place, possessions and people'.<sup>1</sup> Is it appropriate to ascribe suffering to God, to imagine that God suffers? And if so (and if not), what are the implications for the work of pastoral care and the thinking of pastoral theology?

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<sup>1</sup> In eds D J Atkinson & D H Field, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, IVP: Leicester, 1995, p 823.

Through most of two millennia, the tradition has, at least by clear majority view, always been reluctant to speak of God's suffering – though recent critiques allege that this was because of an unfortunate influence from Greek modes of thought. In British theology there were a number of advances early in the twentieth century. A contributor to this, though that contribution is still difficult to assess, was made by a well-known pastor: Studdert Kennedy, the chaplain of the Great War known as 'Woodbine Willie', began to articulate in verse some of the insights which in their German manifestation later in the century were to be called "theology of the cross", and it is the work of that pastor, Woodbine Willie himself, that I want to examine in more detail first.

### **Studdert Kennedy**

The twentieth century was an era when the 'passibility of God' came to be imagined – it was also an era when men and women came to be aware of the sufferings of their fellows. The trenches of the so-called Great War stand as one of the iconic moments of this awareness. The churches, in general, were wholeheartedly behind the war-effort. But the effects on religious faith are thought to be negative. Where was God in the trenches? There must have been many servicemen and their relatives who concluded that God could not have been in the trenches at all. Perhaps he sheltered thirty miles behind the lines with the officers, or maybe he was - like the church that told his story - some aloof irrelevance.

As soon as war broke out the churches took seriously their pastoral duty to enlisted men. Chaplains of all denominations were serving at the Front by late 1914. Baptist Union minutes from June and September 1917 note the loss of Chaplains in action, though these were not the first such losses.

When we turn to examine the role of army chaplains in general we find a mixed picture. The most effective appear to have practiced what they preached<sup>2</sup> and so gave an authenticity to their message.<sup>3</sup> Others, however, made a less favourable impression. Of the Chaplain-General, Alan Wilkinson records that "his religious faith tripped too easily off the tongue to make much contact with men facing deep and agonising perplexities,"<sup>4</sup> while Roman Catholic chaplains sent men into action "mentally and spiritually cleaned," the Church of England, with orders not to go forward of Brigade HQ, "could only offer you a cigarette."<sup>5</sup>

What sort of consolation was that?

"They gave me names like their nature,  
Compacted of laughter and tears,  
A sweet that was born of the bitter,  
A joke that was torn from the years

Of their travail and torture, Christ's fools,  
Atoning my sins with their blood,  
Who grinned in their agony sharing  
The glorious madness of God.

That name! Let me hear it - the symbol  
Of unpaid - unpayable debt,  
For the men to whom I owed God's Peace,  
I put off with a cigarette."

That poem, called "Woodbine Willie", is set at the very beginning of the extraordinary collection of poetry *The Unutterable Beauty* by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, who came to be known at the front, and in palaces

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<sup>2</sup> Captain Morgan Watcyn-Williams wrote: "...the padre ... had ever the same straightforward message - a Power greater than war, love stronger than death, and sacrifice the very gate of heaven. He was frank too, with a directness that could be disconcerting, even when it helped. Quoted in Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, p 53.

<sup>3</sup> "Down on the Somme he won his MC. All round Delville and Longueval and Guillemont the wounded came pouring in, but the padre never hesitated, and out among the falling shells and flying splinters carried on with the work of rescue." Quoted in Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, p 53.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, pp 124f.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, pp 111.

and parlours, as 'Woodbine Willie'. The poem shows many of the themes that this remarkable chaplain explores in poetry and prose inspired by the front. "Compacted of laughter and tears," indicates his genuine identification with the troops, solidarity in what Kennedy usually calls a *human* madness but here has *God* share it. The 'movement of incarnation' is evident both in Kennedy's own identification with the troops and in what Kennedy will go on to say about God's own identification with them in their plight. 'The poem 'plays' with the concept of atonement, and reflects Kennedy's enduring sense of never having done enough for those whom he served. He was one who knew he gave no perfect model, but was conscious always of his need to be open to renewal and forgiveness. His sins were atoned by their (his soldier's) blood. Here at least was a man who knew that, sometimes at least, the offer of a cigarette was utterly inadequate. And yet perhaps sometimes, the woodbines became a kind of sacrament.

An ordinand once asked for Kennedy's views on the essential qualifications for a clergyman. The reply came as the threefold office of pastor, prophet and priest. Querying the last role the questioner said: "Do you mean one who dispenses the sacraments?" Kennedy replied: "Yes, but more than that. I mean one who bears upon himself the burden of the sins and sorrows of his people." In this regard, he went on, he was continually aware of his own failures.<sup>6</sup>

Born in 1883 of Irish Anglican stock, Kennedy was a gifted communicator and an avaricious reader. He trained for the ministry at Ripon Hall in Oxford, and after ordination he worked in a poor parish in Rugby, had a brief spell in Leeds, and then became Vicar in

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<sup>6</sup> *G A Studdert Kennedy: by his friends*, Hodder & Stoughton: London 1929, ed J K Mozley.

a downtown parish in Worcester in 1914.<sup>7</sup> War broke out in August and in September 1914 Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy wrote these words in his parish magazine:

“I cannot say too strongly that I believe every able-bodied man ought to volunteer for service anywhere. Here ought to be no shirking of that duty.”<sup>8</sup>

This from the man who would, before long be writing this, “Waste”:

“Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,  
Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,  
Waste of Manhood, waste of Health,  
Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,  
Waste of Blood, and waste of Tears,  
Waste of Youth’s most precious years,  
Waste of ways the Saints have trod,  
Waste of glory, Waste of God, -  
War!”

Soon Kennedy wanted to play a part in the war effort he had exhorted his parishioners to be involved in. He seems to have thought about ordinary enlisting, but by the end of 1914 was already beginning to explore a Forces Chaplaincy. That was not entirely straightforward at this time: he would have to make arrangements for his parish, convince his Bishop, and the Chaplain-General – an evangelical who was suspicious of those who, like Kennedy, were associated with Anglo-Catholicism (though pigeon-holing Kennedy so neatly seems precarious). By December 1915 he had been appointed Temporary Chaplain, and on Christmas day he found himself in France, preaching to 400 men and receiving communicants in a barn, as the rain and guns thundered.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in W E Purcell, *Woodbine Willie: A Biography*, Hodder & Stoughton: London. 1962, p 77.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Purcell, *Woodbine Willie*, p 92.

On New Year's day he was posted to Rouen, and a pattern begins to emerge. Some joking and self-deprecation, a powerful sermon, and some community singing. Afterwards he would have a queue of men wanting him to read, or write, letters home. For those going to the Front at the Railway Station he would walk up and down the line of men with a quiet word, a copy of the NT, and a woodbine. Was this really such cold comfort? Was any other sort possible? He wrote back to Worcester how he would often have to cling on the final carriage to complete this ministry, jumping off to watch the disappearing tail-lights with a lump in his throat – “and a curse on the sin that causes war. There is nothing glorious about this departure, except the glory of their patience and grim determination. It is all sordid and filthy.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1916, in advice given to fellow chaplains, the incarnational movement is clearly understood:

“Live with the men, go where they go, make up your mind that you will share their risks, and more, if you can do any good. You can take it that the best place for a padre is where there is the most danger of death. Our first job is to go beyond the men in self-sacrifice and reckless devotion. Don't be bamboozled into believing that your proper place is behind the lines – it isn't.”<sup>10</sup>

Part of his strategy in getting alongside and winning the confidence of the men was controversial. He swore to get their attention, beginning one sermon “I know what you're thinking, here comes that bloody parson!”<sup>11</sup> In the middle of 1917 he won the MC for “conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty” during the attack on Messines Ridge. He fetched extra medical supplies by running through a shelled area,

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Michael Grundy, *A Fiery Glow in the Darkness* (Osborne: Worcester, 1997). P 40.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Grundy, *A Fiery Glow*, p 44.

<sup>11</sup> *A Fiery Glow*, p 44

and retrieved wounded men from no-man's land. There were reports of prayers with the dying there too, and burials as the battle roared about him.

Studdert Kennedy had turned his hand to poetry in Worcester before the war, his verse from front found favour with the Chaplain General and two collections were published for distribution among the men.<sup>12</sup> Its possible to discern hints of the influence of Houseman and Kipling, and perhaps even Browning and Tennyson.<sup>13</sup>

Kennedy's experiences at the Front seem to have changed his view of war rather rapidly. True, he still toured encouraging the troops in a 'circus troop' that included a boxer, two wrestlers, and a bayoneting hero – and maybe there was something 'showy' about him that could never resist an audience (or they him!). But his attitude to war seemed to have little in common with that early magazine article.

While the poems seem interesting and often very effective, they are probably not original in any literary way. But what of their theology? His 'war poetry' may not have the rigour or style of Owen or Sassoon, but it reveals him as what we would not think of as a 'pastoral theologian'.

This in two ways: clearly he is someone whose poetic voice has a decidedly pastoral perspective. For instance, Studdert Kennedy was considered by some to be too understanding of the difficulties of marriage and sexual relationships. This is clear from the very human, and very short, "Temptation":

"Pray! Have I prayed! When I'm worn with all my praying"  
When I've bored the blessed angels with my battery of prayer!

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<sup>12</sup> Kennedy gave all the royalties to a charity for the blind in Worcester!

<sup>13</sup> I'm grateful to my colleague Dr Julian Thompson's professional eye on Studdert Kennedy's verse.

It's the proper thing to say – but it's only saying, saying,  
And I cannot get to Jesus for the glory of her hair.”

Or there is the similarly short “A Scrap of paper”, one of a number of poems viewing the war with imagination from the Home Front:

“Just a little scrap of paper  
In a yellow envelope,  
And the whole world is a ruin,  
Even hope.”

Here there we see evidence of the incarnational movement of empathy which we discussed earlier.

Another of these poems is “The Pensioner” – an example of the Kipling-esque turning to dialect, which sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. Here we hear a story of childhood sweethearts who become a delightful married couple, with hints of sexual bliss

“I can feel them red ‘ot kisses  
on my lips or on my ‘air,  
I can feel ‘is arm tight round me,  
Gawd! I tell ye it ain't fair.  
Look ye what the war's done at ‘im,  
Lying there as still as death.  
See ‘is mouth all screwed and twisted,  
With the pain of drawing breath!”

The woman knows she should be happy for her pension – she's been told so. But it does not slake her grief.

But my pension won't buy kisses,  
An' ‘e'll never kiss again,  
‘E ain't got no kissin' in ‘im,  
Ain't got nothing now but pain.  
Not as I would ever change ‘im  
For the strongest man alive...

But I says – let them as makes ‘em  
Fight their wars and mourn their dead,  
Let their women sleep for ever  
In a loveless, childless bed.  
No – I know – it ain’t right talkin’,  
But there’s times as I am wild.  
Gawd! You dunno ‘ow I wants it –  
‘Ow I wants – a child – ‘is child.”

This extraordinary poem shows a breadth of sympathy, and an earthiness about his sympathies that is arresting. Again the incarnational movement of empathy displays a disciplined and compassionate imagination. There is something similar in the searing “I know not where they have laid him” – describing a mother’s sense of desolation for a son lost in action. She agonises, imagining the body defiled and deserted – and despite the Parson’s reassurance that it’s the soul not the body that matters, she complains “the Parson ain’t never ‘ad no child.”

“But even a father never knows  
The ache in a mother’s heart,  
When she and the body ‘er body bore  
Are severed and torn apart...

... I’d like to know just where it’s laid,  
That body my body bore,  
And I’d like to now who’ll mother ‘im  
Out there in that other shore,  
Who will be bearin’ the mother’s part  
And be makin’ your body, boy?  
Who will be ‘avin’ the mother’s pain,  
And ‘avin the mother’s joy?  
Gawd, is it you? Then bow You down  
And ‘ark to a mother’s prayer.

Don't keep it all to yourself, Good Lord,  
But give 'is old mother a share.  
Gimme a share of the travail pain  
Of my own son's second birth,  
Double the pain if you double the joy  
That a mother feels on earth.  
Gimme the sorrow and not the joy,  
If that 'as to be Your will;  
Gimme the labour and not the pride,  
But make me 'is mother still.  
Maybe the body as 'e shall wear  
Is born of my breaking heart,  
Maybe these pains are the new birth pangs  
What'll give my laddie 'is start.  
Then I'd not trouble 'ow hard they was,  
I'd gladly go through the mill,  
If that noo body 'e wore were mine,  
And I were 'is mother still."

This poem may be the most remarkable of all. With extraordinary imaginative power Kennedy not only empathetically perceives the pain of the bereaved mother but also goes a step further, mysteriously suggesting the pain of the second birth is born by God as the dead son is reborn to eternal life. Kennedy's experience of the pain of his men, and his imaginative construal of the pain of the grieving mother, allows him to suggest something about the pain of God – who also, Kennedy would say, knows the loss of a Son.

In both of these 'pastoral' poems Kennedy succeeds not only in making us look at the reality of God in a surprising way (here as one who bears a mother-pain), but also shows a brave attempt to empathise with women in their suffering. All this suffering, Kennedy affirms, is the very suffering of God.

This indicates that Studdert Kennedy is a 'pastoral theologian' in another way too. In a more modern usage of the expression we mean to speak of the way in which pastoral experience – rather than being the application of theology acquired elsewhere – actually becomes the raw material of that theology. The practice shapes the theory, not always the other way around. This is also evidenced in his poetry. Whether or not Kennedy held a view of the passibility of God before the war, it is clear that his wartime service has informed and deepened such a view.

His view of the suffering of God is distinctly *Christocentric*, and *crucicentric*. In "The Comrade God" he addresses the one who "dwells in depths of timeless being", who can "count the stars upon their courses", and who views earth from the standpoint of eternity. Such a God, who watches benignly but aloofly, is

    "...too great to love me,  
    Since thou dost reign beyond the reach of tears...

    Only in Him can I find home to hide me,  
    Who on the Cross was slain to rise again;  
    Only with Him, my Comrade God, beside me,  
    Can I go forth to war with sin and pain."

This same theme is explored in "The Suffering God":

    "If He could speak, that victim torn and bleeding,  
    Caught in His pain and nailed upon the Cross.  
    Has he to give the comfort souls are needing?  
    Could he destroy the bitterness of loss?

    Once and for all men say He came and bore it,  
    Once and for all set up His throne on high,  
    Conquered the world and set His standard o'er it,  
    Dying that once, that men may never die."

But such a “once and for all” suffering is not enough; it does not meet the pastoral needs of the men to whom he ministers. So Kennedy has to delve deeper into the mystery of the cross.

“How can it be that God can reign in glory,  
Calmly content with what his Love has done,  
Reading unmoved the piteous shameful story,  
All the vile deeds men do beneath the sun...”

“Father, if He, Christ, were Thy Revealer,  
Truly the First begotten of the Lord,  
Then must Thou be a Suff’rer and a Healer,  
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.

Then must it mean, not only that thy sorrow  
Smote Thee that once upon the lonely tree,  
But that to-day, to-night, and on the morrow,  
Still it will come, O Gallant God, to thee...”

Kennedy’s doctrine of God seems to have been thoroughly Trinitarian,<sup>14</sup>

and elsewhere he returns to the Trinitarian implications of the Cross:

“All through the ages men have crucified God, not knowing what they did... There has always been a voice crying in the heart of

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<sup>14</sup> He concludes his short book on Christian basics, *The Wicket Gate*, as follows: “The doctrine of the Blessed Trinity must be brought out of the study into the street, and must lay hold on men [sic], not as a theory, but as an experience. The Father and the Son must become One in our souls, and, from that unity proceeding, there must descend upon the Church of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who will drive all Christians out to bear the sin of the world, and claim its kingdoms as the kingdoms of Christ, crying in their hearts ‘Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever, Amen.’ Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, *The Wicket Gate*, reprinted in *The Best of Studdert Kennedy: selected from his writing by a friend* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1947), p 123.

God, appealing to his Fatherhood, 'Forgive them for they know not what they do'."<sup>15</sup>

This glimpse into the 'inner life of God', informed by his wartime service, suggests that the Trinity is formed in the crying of the suffering son to the fatherhood of God.

There is no suggestion even through the awfulness of war that the Suffering God bids us lay down arms. Kennedy does not become a pacifist in the trenches so far as we can make out – he would probably have been a pretty useless pastor if he had! It is part of God's suffering, like humanity's, that war is 'necessary' – albeit tragic and wasteful. Kennedy is a pastoral theologian in that his experience of the war shapes his thinking about God. That thinking in turn returns to give comfort to those with whom he serves, it is even able to offer support and comfort to those about to go and 'fight the good fight'.<sup>16</sup> In what way has Kennedy's poetic insight from the pastor's perspective into God and the human condition enriched our thinking about each of these things?

### **The Contemporary Debate about the Passibility of God**

One of the unresolved questions which arises when one considers Kennedy's suggestions is: from where did he get such ideas? As J K Mozley makes clear in his 1926 *The Impassibility of God*, the beginnings of the reaction against traditional doctrine of impassibility are difficult to discern. Such hints as are made are unsystematic and inconsistent, but they begin sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He considers the possible influence of Pringle-Pattison and William James, and Horace Bushnell right back in 1866. But we do not have the information that allows us easily to move from any one of these possible influences, or others that Mozley mentions, to Kennedy.

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<sup>15</sup> Studdert Kennedy, *Food for Thought*, reprinted in *The Best of*, p 84.

<sup>16</sup> Poems like "The Sniper" and "No Retaliation" acknowledge the enemy as legitimate targets. Though these poems are in dialect, cast in another's voice.

If the tide in the twentieth century seemed to be flowing toward divine passibility, the issue remains contentious. The most recent rigorous and persuasive defence of the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility is certainly offered by Tom Weinandy in his *Can God Suffer?*

He begins by arguing for the ontological otherness of God:<sup>17</sup> can the Wholly Other change? Such language cannot be used literally, according to Weinandy. God does not change because his love is always constant. Rather, as he will go on to say, God does not change at all, even in response to human persons, because God's love is supremely constant. What changes is our appreciation or experience of God's love according to our changing circumstances. To say this expresses his total otherness.<sup>18</sup>

Weinandy's discussion of the Trinity speaks of the primacy of relationships and verbs: Father, Son and Spirit *are* verbs. This is the theological statement of the more philosophical affirmation that God is *actus purus*, pure act. The persons of the Trinity are each alike impassible, because, as subsistent relations fully in act, they are 'already' completely and utterly passionate in their self-giving to one another and cannot become *more* passionate for they are constituted, and subsist, in this mutual self-giving.<sup>19</sup>

He argues that

'The simple answer to the question: 'Does God suffer?'" is No, God in himself as God does not suffer. To say that God does not suffer means not only that he not feel any physical pain, since he is not corporeal, but also that he does not undergo

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<sup>17</sup> *Can God suffer?* p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Can God suffer?* p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> pp. 119f.

some possible changes of state whereby he experiences some form of divine emotional agitation, anguish, agony, or distress. God is never in a state of inner *angst*.<sup>20</sup>

God's love, like human love, embraces, e.g., commitment, affection, joy, mercy, forgiveness, grief, anger, admonition, even condemnation. But humans actualise these at particular moments: because God's love is fully in act and all these aspects of love are fully actualised always within the Trinity. God does not change his manner or expression of love when someone repents, or suffers injustice:

‘Eternally God is immutably and impassibly adapted to every situation and circumstance, not because his love is indifferent and unresponsive, but because his love, with all its facets, is fully in act, and so he is supremely and utterly responsive to every situation and circumstance.’<sup>21</sup>

But here we begin to detect some of the problems with this position. What looks like a response to creation, and to human persons is nothing of the sort. God does not respond. Apparently his Wholly Otherness prevents God from doing so. God cannot vary his reaction to any situation: not to my stubbing my toe in the dark last night after finishing this lecture, not to the mother who grieves for her lost son on Flanders field, not to the gassing of millions of Jews in Auschwitz. What changes is that human persons apprehend God's constant and never changing love (admittedly a rich love, with commitment, anger, compassion etc within it) differently according to their circumstances.

What to Weinandy seems like a strength will seem to others more of a lack. God cannot respond, he is trapped by his Otherness. Weinandy want to say that if God responded he would cease to be Other, cease to be God. But Barth can affirm that the Otherness of God is this:

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<sup>20</sup> *Can God Suffer?* p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> *Can God Suffer?* p. 162.

that God determines to be Who He Is, and not be determined by some ontological necessity, not even the necessities which go with being Wholly Other.

In fact, if we look more closely at Weinandy's account of God as *actus purus* we see a similar problem. He takes issue with those who suggest that this Classical view of God is of a static, inert reality – that this is, as has been claimed, the legacy of Greek philosophy in this regard. Certainly he succeeds in sketching a vision of God in a more dynamic way as pure act, in constant motion. But the problem arises when this motion is examined, for it is *utterly* constant, and has to be. Never varying in any way, this pure act seems less distinguishable from stillness than we might have at first imagined.

Weinandy's argument is attractive in many respects, and has an internal coherence to it. But we seem to have a vision of constancy and assurance it is at the cost of responsiveness and what we can recognise as true relationality.

The earliest theologians feared to speak of the suffering of God, linking such talk change in God – and therefore with diminution. The pastoral corollary of this was often a certain sort of 'resignation' allied to an implicit theological determinism. Suffering was 'meant to be', or served some 'higher purpose'. It could easily result in the sort of reaction Fiddes relates at the beginning of his chapter on "The Vulnerable God and the Problem of Suffering"<sup>22</sup> where a woman beset by chronic illness says "I have come a tacit agreement with God that we just don't talk about it any longer." There is clearly a need for a theology which 'funds' the conversation which pastors share with those who suffer for, as Fiddes goes on to point out, "the way pastors act and react ... *will* be guided by the image of God that they hold."

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<sup>22</sup> *Participating in God*, ch 5.

His case is that basic to any understanding of the problem of suffering is the suffering of *God*. Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross is a sound place to make connections – with Moltmann's insight that there is here a death, and a loss, *in God*.

In the past Christian theologians took rather lightly the OT witness to a God who suffered because of his love for his people. God is spoken of as one who grieves, is disappointed, and even labours under the burden of Israel's plight. These were usually thought of as accommodations to human understanding, anthropomorphisms rather than descriptions of how God 'really' is.<sup>23</sup> Paul Fiddes points out that often we are not simply shown God sharing human suffering, but God calling on the prophet to share *his* suffering! The insight into the suffering of God granted to Hosea for instance, allows Hosea to see more clearly the plight of the people.<sup>24</sup>

In the NT the cross assumes such a central position that it seems remarkable that Christians were able to 'defend' God from the imputation of suffering for so long. By using the two-nature doctrine theology sought to avoid the conclusion that God suffers, and there is an intrinsically Nestorian feel about most of the discussion that tried to say that Jesus suffered in his human nature, and that God only shared this through the *communitio idiomatum*.

Barth moved some way towards the theology of the cross. He could speak of a sorrow in the heart of God, which in some way is prior to (yet greater than) any sorrow in the heart of human beings.<sup>25</sup> But he also speaks of the suffering of the Father in the offering and sending of the Son as an alien suffering, a suffering God takes to himself, but which is not really his own suffering. God chooses to identify with

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (OUP, Oxford 1988), pp19f.

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Hosea 11: 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, p 225.

it.<sup>26</sup> In such a way Barth is able to maintain God's sovereignty over the suffering. He also says that God's suffering differs from ours in that it is not passive but active – God always maintains the initiative, and the suffering originates in himself rather than outside of himself. Barth's statements perhaps find resolution through his doctrine of election, which also links to divine suffering. For God chose to be the God of our humanity, and so God "elected our suffering ... He elected it as his own suffering."<sup>27</sup>

Barth seeks to avoid saying that suffering makes God vulnerable to diminution, to becoming 'less God' - one of the early motives in upholding the impassibility of God, as it is in Weinandy's argument.

Moltmann wants to go further than saying that God identifies with human suffering. For him the significance of the cross is such as to call for a revolution in the very concept of God<sup>28</sup>, because it is an event between God and God, Father and Son.

For Moltmann, God in his love identifies with humanity and so becomes both vulnerable and changeable. This has to be explained not by talking of the *two natures*, but the *three persons* of the trinity. The Son is delivered up to death by the Father. In what Moltmann calls "patricompassionism"<sup>29</sup>, the Son suffers forsakenness and the Father suffers the death of the Son. This is not something the Father and Son merely identify with, but is "in God", and since Father and Son love and are open to the world, this history of the cross includes all human suffering.

"The concrete 'history of God' in the death of Jesus on the cross on Golgotha therefore contains within itself all the depths and

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<sup>26</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, p 357.

<sup>27</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, pp 164f.

<sup>28</sup> *The Crucified God*, p 152.

<sup>29</sup> *The Crucified God*, pp 243f. See Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, p 357.

abysses of human history ... [A]ll human history is taken up into the 'history of God', i.e. into the trinity."<sup>30</sup>

"What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them."<sup>31</sup>

The suffering of God is a Trinitarian suffering which takes into itself all creaturely suffering. Like the cross of Christ even Auschwitz is in God, taken up into the grief of the Father, the surrender of the Son and the power of the Spirit.

Fiddes puts our human suffering within the suffering of God in a way clearly linked to his theme of participation. God exists, he argues, in triune relationships, and God has made room for us to participate in these movements of relationship. God is not merely 'alongside us' in our suffering, but we are taken up into the movements of God's own suffering, participating in them: our suffering is a participation in God (a perfection of them as in Colossians?). Not simply accompanied by a 'fellow sufferer who understands (Whitehead), "we are embraced by movements of suffering love – like those, for instance, between a father who has lost a beloved son and a son who has been forsaken and abandoned by all whom he loves."<sup>32</sup>

Any sympathetic treatment of God's suffering will want to ask about the extent to which God remains the Lord. We may feel that we need to affirm dialectically that God both suffers and does not suffer.

Process thought often comes under criticism as delivering a God who is unsafe – who will become the supreme victim. But Process thought is more complex than the caricature often given of it. True,

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<sup>30</sup> *The Crucified God*, p 246.

<sup>31</sup> *The Crucified God*, p 244 (see also p 245).

<sup>32</sup> *Participating in God*, p 162.

Hartshorne's language of God's *abstract* and *concrete* poles does suggest that to think of God as in any sense absolute or impassible is to abstract from the livingness of God. Concretely, as it were, God is relative, passible. But Whitehead's language is different and more readily interpreted to mean that God really is both primordial and consequent, in some ways absolute and in some ways relative – perhaps both in some ways impassible and in some ways passible. With Whitehead it is clearer that both primordial and consequent natures are abstractions from what I have called the livingness of God.

But, as Fiddes suggests, part of our experience of suffering is a sense of helplessness in the face of it. If God at any moment could revoke or transform it in what sense is this suffering other than a form of masochism? He examines Frances Young's poignant treatment of the matter in her 'narrative essay in suffering', *Face to Face*. Young argues that we can only cope with suffering if God suffers – but also if there is some 'aspect' of God which is beyond suffering, a 'dark side, beyond passion.'<sup>33</sup> Fiddes prefers, among other things, to see 'God beyond suffering' in the resurrection that is beyond the cross – in the promise of God's final triumph.

So a question emerges more clearly here about the pastor's care for one who is suffering. To what extent can and should the pastor remain in some respects at least removed from, safe from, invulnerable to, the suffering of those for whom she cares. I have suggested that we might need to affirm that God both exposes Godself to suffering and yet remains in some way apart from it. Process thought with its dipolar conception of God has always suggested something like this. A doctrine of the Trinity with a full theology of incarnation would seem to make this possible. Something similar seems to be required of the human pastor too: the pastor must, in

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<sup>33</sup> Participating in God, pp 180ff.

common humanity, give himself or herself wholly to the suffering of another. In empathetic imagination and loving solidarity they bear the suffering of the other and so help them bear what might be unbearable. In so doing they represent, and re-present, the way God bears our suffering in Christ. But in role the pastor must also remain apart from it. Professional good practice in remaining detached enough to be helpful requires it, and indeed the cared-for will also expect and hope for the degree of detachment that comes from role. That these two contradictory responses should be born by one person is a demanding prospect, and yet the pastors' task is to integrate them in their one ministerial person.

Perhaps the pastor's witness - a witness given by Kennedy in the trenches - is more like Young's mysterious both/and. And in so doing the pastor might provide a model that illumines the very being of God. Then we might suspect of course, that it is God who shapes this pastoral task and pastoral relationship in the first place - and what we thought was a pointer to the nature of God is just a pale reflection of it after all.