My theme this morning is suffering. God knows, we have seen plenty of brutal and harrowing examples in recent weeks. It’s a large theme. And it’s a difficult theme—in more than one sense. But it’s a theme from which we surely must not shrink.

The Bible has plenty to teach us about suffering. The two passages that I have selected for this morning’s readings bear witness to that. Both are about suffering. But there is something else that they have in common. Both are concerned with the relationship between suffering and sin. In the Genesis passage a direct connection is suggested: suffering is the penalty for our sin. In the passage from John the connection is queried. Whose suffering exactly is a penalty for whose sin, exactly? And a further controversy is sparked off when Jesus intervenes to relieve some suffering and the question arises among some of his enemies about how he manages to do it and what his intervention means. Well, what does it mean?

Let’s begin by reflecting on suffering itself. It is very clear why suffering has exercised so many great minds in the Judaeo-Christian tradition for so long. There appears to be a direct conflict between the
sheer fact of suffering and our belief in an all-loving, all-powerful God. Surely, of all the threats to our belief, this is the most serious.

The orthodox view is that God, benevolently, has granted us humans freedom to do as we will. We, however, abuse this gift, and that is what gives rise to suffering. This is the picture that we find in the Genesis story. There is, according to that story, a very direct route from human sin, or human rebellion, to human suffering. The idea of a direct connection between sin and suffering is plausible enough when we reflect on the examples we’ve witnessed recently. But in these cases the suffering seems not to be borne by those responsible for it, whereas in the Genesis passage it’s rather different. Suffering is depicted as a punishment for the sin. But the crucial thing is the connection. And it is this connection that Jesus’s disciples grapple with at the beginning of the reading from John, where they wonder just what form it takes. What is the cause of the blind man’s blindness? Is he blind because of his own sin? Or because of his parents’ sin? Does each of us have to reckon with the consequences of his or her own wrong-doing, or is there something more subtle somehow built into the very structure of the human condition? How exactly does the equation work?

Well, you’ll be unsurprised to hear that I’m not going to propose a solution to the problem of suffering this morning. Suffice to say that
none of the standard approaches to this problem seems to me satisfactory. If we are to reach intellectual peace with this problem, then I think we need to draw on resources of an altogether different kind.

But that’s not the most basic level on which the problem of suffering is a problem. It is not just an intellectual problem. Of course it isn’t. That is the most obvious thing about it. It’s a problem, first and foremost, of an entirely non-intellectual kind. And its impact on us is first and foremost of an entirely non-intellectual kind. Suffering is something that we have to live with, something that we have to deal with. It affects every one of us, in many very different ways, physically, emotionally, morally, and practically—whether in the form of our own suffering or in the form of the suffering of others. Each person here this morning has had their own very real, very direct contact with suffering—some that other people know about, some that other people might only be able to guess at, and some, perhaps, of which no-one else has the least idea.

Let’s return to the passage from John. This is one of my favourite stories in the whole Bible. I have been talking about a certain debate that rages around suffering in the Judaeo-Christian intellectual world. In this story, likewise, debate rages around the blind man and the incidents that befall him. But the two real protagonists of the story seem to be gloriously immune to a lot of the debate. They both seem to know, in their own very
different ways, from their own very different perspectives, what is really important. They reckon with the suffering, not in intellectual terms, but in terms of its immediate impact on them. I am referring, of course, to Jesus and the blind man himself.

‘Why was this man born blind?’ the disciples ask Jesus. ‘Was it because of his own sin, or because of his parents’?’ They are reflecting some basic presuppositions of their time. No doubt neither of the proposed answers would satisfy them. Each would raise further, equally troubling questions. If the man’s blindness is due to his own sin, and yet is also congenital, must his sin somehow have preceded his birth? If his blindness is due to his parents’ sin, what possible justice can there be in that? But Jesus rejects their question. It’s not a matter of anyone’s sin. This man is blind; he has suffered throughout his life as a result of his blindness; and so there is work to be done. And that work must be done while the opportunity is still there. ‘We must work the work of him who sent me,’ says Jesus, ‘while it is day; night is coming when no-one can work.’ Jesus cures the blind man.

Later the intellectual hubbub increases. As well as the disciples fretting about what the blind man’s blindness means, there are the Pharisees wondering how he can possibly have been cured; there are the man’s neighbours wondering whether he has really been cured; and there are the
man’s parents not even daring to enter into the debate. There are questions and answers and follow-up questions and accusations. And, in amidst all of this, there is the man himself, no doubt overjoyed that he can now see, no doubt utterly bemused by what is going on around him. Eventually he ventures some opinions of his own. But before that he says something that gets to the heart of the matter. ‘Come on,’ they say to the man, ‘Confess. There was something sinister about the person who cured you, wasn’t there? There’s no good in him. He was a sinner, wasn’t he?’

The issue has now turned from whether the blind man himself is a sinner to whether Jesus is sinner. And we can almost hear the blind man’s plea: ‘Leave me alone; leave me alone.’ And then comes the comment to which I was referring: ‘Look: one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ There it is, in its utter simplicity. ‘Though I was blind, now I see.’ Though he was in darkness, now he has access to the light. No doubt, given that this is John’s gospel, there are all sorts of layers of metaphorical meaning to be discerned here. But we can also think of it in the most straightforward, most literal way. Jesus sees in suffering the opportunity to do the work of God. The man sees—literally sees—that God’s work has been done. That is what is really important.

This is not, of course, a solution to the intellectual problem with which we began. In fact, it hardly touches that problem. Nor is it a solution to any practical problem. We are given no recipe here for going out and
eliminating suffering. There is plenty of suffering in the world, much of which we can do nothing about. All I have been trying to do in these reflections, quite simply, is to issue a reminder of what suffering—our own and other people’s—may mean to us. Let the disciples, the Pharisees, and the philosophers debate to their hearts’ content. There is work to be done; and we must pray that God will give us the courage and the determination to do that work.

But there is one final point that we need to remember as well. However exercised we may be by the intellectual problem, however deep our own involvement with suffering may be, we are bound to wonder where God is in all of this. Where is God when people are hurting so badly? Where is God when war and terrorism and avoidable catastrophe cause death, injury, and heartache for so many of our fellow men and women? Where is God when young children are abused by the very people they should be able to trust? Or when we ourselves find that we can barely cope with what life throws at us? The answer is that God is right there, in amongst it all—suffering too. That is one of Christianity’s most basic teachings. As Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians, it is not a question of signs; it is not a question of wisdom; it is a question of Christ nailed to a cross—God nailed to a cross.
If we pray that God will give us the courage and the determination to work at confronting suffering, we can then also find help in the knowledge that it is not work that has been delegated to us from afar. God hurts as much as we do—no, far more than we do. Suffering is not a threat to our faith. It is the proof of our faith. That is to say, it is the point at which our faith is tested, the point at which God most intimately meets us—provided that we are prepared to meet God. And with God’s grace, and with God’s help, we can hope, eventually, through that meeting, to look back and say, ‘One thing we know, that though there was darkness, now there is light.’

Amen.