

Earlier this month, in an Irish television programme, Stephen Fry was asked about God. In his imaginary conversation with the God he doesn't believe in, Fry says he would tell him: "How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right.

"It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?" There was quite a lot more in a similar vein, but I think that is enough to give you a flavour.

Stephen Fry is not alone in thinking like this. There is no doubt that there is injustice in the world, and not just that caused by man's inhumanity to man. There are diseases of children, earthquakes and tsunamis, ebola, malaria, forest fires and drought, flooding and impact by meteor. The ways of dying naturally are endless and pretty unpleasant.

We, by which I mean Christians, talk of God as a God of love and we would not be engaging our intellect if we didn't wonder whether there is some mismatch here between the possible pain and suffering in the world, and a loving creator. Why not, as Stephen Fry suggests, create a world in which there was no disease, no accidents, no pain? In attempting to address this enormous and important question, I want to start with today's gospel reading.

It starts with the baptism of Jesus and God's voice saying

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And what does God immediately do with this Son, with whom he is so pleased?

He sends him out into the wilderness to face wild beasts, hunger, and temptation. Why? Because Jesus has discovered that he has power, and that he has choice. He is being asked to do the will of God and he can refuse, or worse, he could use his power for his own glory or gain. But the important thing is that he has this freedom. All his actions, the teaching, the choosing of the disciples, the healing, the hours spent in prayer, they are his choice, freely made. He is tempted and resists.

We too have incredible choice. Each and every day we make hundreds of small decisions – whether to walk or catch a bus or use the car, whether to eat a biscuit or not, whether to say what we are thinking or bite our tongue – and occasionally we make big decisions,

whether to move house or take a new job. And these decisions, even some of the very small ones, have repercussions. They directly or indirectly affect those around us.

We are not controlled by some external force, our lives do not follow some predetermined course, we are free. That of course means that we can make bad choices, we can hurt each other and we can damage our environment. The good news for us is that our environment is fairly good at repairing damage. Not instantly, but over time, bare earth will be recolonized, new species will evolve, life continues. Of course, there will be a point of no return for some species. We are currently on a path to mass extinctions, but even then, some life forms will continue. What makes this possible, what enables us to have this remarkable freedom, is that our world is not static. The changeable geology with its inherent risks of earthquakes and volcanoes has played a part in the evolution of microbes. Even our bodies are not static. The cells are constantly growing and repairing. Inevitably sometimes the processes go wrong and some cells start to grow out of control and a cancerous growth develops.

Is this evil? Is it the plan of a mean-spirited vindictive God? I think not. It is a world which allows us choice, freedom to love or to hate, freedom to build or destroy, freedom to believe in God or to deny God's existence, freedom to experience joy and fear, peace and pain. Freedom to understand what is meant by altruism, by compassion, by goodness, and an environment in which those qualities can be expressed.

A world in which we had no freedom, no choice, would deny us humanity. We would be puppets, automatons. A world in which we had choice but where nothing could get hurt, where there was no risk, would deny us the ability to develop any system of morality. It would not matter what we did. How could society, friendships, even families, develop in such an environment? We have the immense privilege of living in a place where we can, if we choose, attempt grow into generous, kind, compassionate beings, who are in essence the embodiment of self-giving love. We have before us the example of Christ. This gift of a world which is full of danger and risk, of excitement and challenge, and, yes, where the innocent can get horrible diseases or get crushed in an earthquake, is the gift of one who wants the best for us, wants us to be the best we can be, want us to live every minute of our lives to the full, valuing each second because it is precious and like no other second. For me, that is the sign of a very generous God of love, a God who does not want to hold everything close to himself, but who sets us free.

Stephen Fry is right to reject the concept of a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God. Who would want to worship such a God? Once one realises that God is a God of freedom and consistent generosity, truly a God of love, how can one fail to worship him. Amen.