

WHY ME LORD?

The Rev. Canon Joan Butler Ford St. Paul's Cathedral, San Diego, California
Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

A lovely, lively girl of 17 disappears from a jogging trail, later to be found murdered. Every parent's nightmare. A horribly poor island nation is devastated by an earthquake. A family in a coastal town in Chile is sitting on their front porch suddenly to be swept into the sea by a tsunami, leaving one grief stricken person behind. A lingering and incurable illness shatters another family. What is going on? Why are these things happening? Have all the people affected done something wrong? By no means!

The first part of today's Gospel allows us an excellent opportunity to correct a distorted view of God prevalent in today's culture. How often is the death of a loved one thought to be the act of God, who for some reason is held responsible? "Why did God let this happen to me? Why? Well, our passage today argues against the view that tragedies in the world are routinely to be interpreted as a manifestation of the wrath of God or as the will of God.

When a teenager is deliberately killed and sexually assaulted, one cannot fault a parent for asking, "Why did God let this happen to me?" or, "Where was God?" Parents going through the pain of losing a child, victims of what insurance companies used to call "acts of God", earthquakes, fires, and the like, and incurably sick people are permitted to ask any question they feel like asking. When they ask such questions they are not looking for information. They are trying to come to grips with their pain and the meaning of life. When people endure tragedy and ask such questions, they are probably not looking for carefully thought out, rational answers. The questions are emotional and existential outbursts of pain and hurt. What they need is for someone to offer them a shoulder to cry on and arms which embrace them.

Rabbi Kushner says:

"The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families. They are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just, fair and livable world. They inevitably raise questions about the goodness, the kindness, even the existence of God." ¹

A good friend, a devout Roman Catholic, suddenly stopped going to Mass because of her sister's prolonged suffering and death. She still can't come to grips with the idea that God wasn't letting Louise suffer so.

While there are no definitive answers that I know of to answer the age old questions of theodicy, that is, the study of the problem of evil in relation to the proposition that there is an all-powerful good God, the first part of this Gospel gives us some clues. After describing murders at the Temple and the death of construction workers in Shiloam, the answer that Jesus gives in this passage is that those who suffer calamities are NOT

¹ *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Avon Books, N.Y., N.Y. 1981, Rabbi H. Kushner

worse sinners than anyone else. When others suffer a tragedy, it should serve as a reminder to all of us that the reason we were spared is NOT because God loves us more than they.

How easy it is to attribute the worst to others. Jerry Falwell once famously said, "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals."

Earthquakes in Haiti and Chile and El Niño storms in California are not God's judgment on sinful areas! The words of Jesus in Luke 13, "unless you repent, you will all perish," were spoken not to pagan infidels or a crowd of murderers but to people who were good, religious folk who led decent lives in accord with the law of God. Why would such people have any need for repentance? Repentance is not just for the murderer and the adulterer. Repentance is not something to be done once and then given up. Repentance is an ongoing attitude as expressed in the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:4 to be prayed by the disciples, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Jesus rejects retribution and yet calls for repentance. The question, Why did this happen to these particular people? is as old as the human race. In The Book of Job, God had allowed Satan to do everything he wanted to Job except kill him. What was Job's reaction? Certainly a "Why me" attitude, but Job also states: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21). Job did not understand why God had allowed the things He did, but he knew God was good and therefore continued to trust in Him. Ultimately, that should be our reaction as well. The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The question assumed that there was a direct correlation between sin and suffering. To those disciples (John 9:3) and in today's lesson Jesus denies that direct correlation. But still the idea persists: illness, poverty, disease, loneliness, and death are the punishment for sins known or unknown.

But the good news for Christians is this; the fatal blow to the idea that suffering and death are the lot of the guilty came at Golgotha. The one without sin suffered and died on the cross. So Jesus' disciples are **forever freed** from the ancient notion that prosperity and good health are evidence of divine favor, whereas poverty and suffering are clear signs of divine wrath.... Jesus rejects such attempts at calculation, not simply because they are futile, but because they direct attention from the primary issue—the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God without linking one's loyalty to God to life's sorrows or joys.

What is repentance for us? Repentance is falling down on our knees before God, confessing our sins, and asking God for forgiveness in and through Jesus. Repentance is more than feeling bad or sorry about your sin. Many people feel badly or guilty about their sin but they keep right on doing it. True repentance is changing the direction of our lives of sin. Repentance is not a response to being caught and the consequences that

follow, because, caught or not, God knows either way. Rather, repentance is heart-felt sorrow for sin and for missing the mark and for hurting the heart of God.

The parable of the unfruitful fig tree offers another look at repentance. Repentance here can be understood as God's gracious offer of extended opportunities for us to respond to the demands of the kingdom of God and allow that to reshape our lives. If John the Baptist was a hell, fire, and brimstone type of preacher with an urgent message of an imminent judgment, Jesus tempered that austere message with a message about a compassionate God who lets an unfruitful fig tree stand another year. The God of judgment is also the God of grace. Jesus hurls scathing rebukes at religious hypocrisy and at the same time reaches out in compassion and touches hopeless people that had been marginalized for a variety of reasons. He pronounces woes on the rich, the well-fed, those laughing at the misfortunes of others, and offers hope and blessing to those who are poor, hungry and weeping (Luke 6:20-26). Judgment may be coming, but the door of mercy is still open. The possibility of change is still available. Will the fig tree become fruitful in another year? God waits and longs for that to happen.

Luke is aware of the grace of God that allows another year, or another century, or another millennium to pass without drawing the curtain on the drama of history. We need to hear the voice of Jesus speaking through Luke, the voice that strikes a note of grace and forbearance on God's part and therefore leaves the future open. The work of Jesus will continue in the world for some time. How long, we cannot say. The end may come unexpectedly. But for now God has graciously allowed a certain delay of the ultimate end. The unfruitful fig tree may yet become fruitful. The world may yet be transformed by the gospel. And we pray that we will be the ones effecting that transformation, as our world today certainly needs us.

As God weeps with the Chelsea King family, the victims of natural disasters, and those gravely ill, we pray:

"O God, from whose eyes the measure of our faith is not hidden, wrench from us now all...rules and regulations of our scheduled selves that separate us from your Holy Spirit...

O God, who claims us as disciples, bless us now and touch us with your holiness that we might have commitment enough to be good news to the poor.

O God of the bruised, we pray for healing. Comfort those who cry in dark corners: the lonely, the strangers, the weary, ...the forsaken, ... the grieving and those who lie in sickness and pain.

O God who wept over Jerusalem, open our eyes to those around us who scream in silence the depth of their despair...

O God of peace, give peace to our hearts and to our nation and to our world.

O lamb of God, have mercy upon us!"²

Amen

² Kneeling in Jerusalem Ann Weems Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992 pp 35-36

