

“Why Me?”

Lent 3 - 7th March 2010

Readings:

Luke 13: 1-9

God of table and God of open door, thank you for your invitation. You feed the deep places in our spirits and speak the words that turn us to the good. Open our ears and send your Spirit to guide us in turning towards and trusting in you. AMEN.

Just after the devastation of the earthquake in Haiti I read something that made me very angry. Masochistically I chose to read an article by Rev. Pat Robertson, a fundamentalist preacher from the U.S. In the article Robertson asserted that the reason Haiti had suffered as a nation for so long and the reason the earthquake had struck was that God was making a judgement on them - a judgement because the Haitian people, former slaves, had revolted from their colonial masters the French and had turned to voodoo in 1791!! And Robertson had it all down chapter and verse and made a perfectly reasonable case - if you believe in an interventionist God - a God who punishes faithlessness and rewards the faithful. Believe in Pat Robertson's God and you won't have to put up with earthquakes. I wonder what he'll see as the problem in Chile?

Robertson's theology presupposes a God that interferes in our lives by giving instant rewards to those who follow him and instant punishment to those who won't. But is that how God really works? Have our lives been made any easier because we are committed Christians? Perhaps there are some here who could say “yes” to that, but I know that there would be a great many of you whose answer would be a resounding ‘No’ and who asked God often - “Why has this happened to me?” “Why have I lost my job?” “Why did my husband have to die so young?” “Why am I so sick?” “Why have my children turned out the way they have?” WHY? WHY?

There is not a week that goes by when I have not had a parishioner ask that question in some form or other. Why? And it is a question that needs to be asked, because it goes to the heart of the big question - Who is this God we worship?

Sadly many of us have been brought up to believe that God is like an old fashioned headmaster. You play up - then wallop! Instant judgement. And if you're good - a pat on the head. Instant reward. This is the sort of God who is everywhere, ready to interfere in people's lives. This is the sort of God who I thought would strike me down dead if I went apple stealing - a favourite pastime of the children I grew up with in Scotland. Mind you, the fear of God didn't stop us from stealing apples. And God interestingly enough did not strike any of us down dead. But the fear still held, for when I got a sore tum the following day from eating too many green apples - Ah well, that's God punishing you!

A childlike view of God, but one that still lingers. When trouble strikes us, there must be a reason and we ask God, why? Why did you allow it to happen, God? Two young people very much in love, are killed on Boxing Day when someone on the wrong side of the road

smashes into them. And we ask why. What did they do wrong? A young woman just graduating from Uni, is diagnosed with cancer and is dead within 4 months. And we ask why. What did she do wrong? What sort of God would allow these things to happen?

Well it's not the God we read about in the Scriptures. So called acts of God are a lie. There is no such thing. The God of Jesus Christ does not act in such a way. And our gospel this morning points that out clearly.

I love this portion of Scripture. It starts out with the news of the day. All Israel is a buzz with it. Did you hear how Pilate massacred some Galilean folk in the Temple - making a sin offering. Dreadful news! Ah but perhaps God is giving us a message through Pilate. Or perhaps they deserved it. - **"Not so!"** says Jesus. **"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they are worse sinners than all Galileans?"**

Then did you hear about those poor fellows, killed on the building site in Jerusalem? 18 of them killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. And as people speculated on why it had happened, Jesus says, **"Do you think those 18 were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"**

Jesus the Christ, obviously, did not believe his Father was an executer of instant judgement, and neither do I. It's not one strike and you're out. It's not even seventy times seven times and you are out. No, Jesus' God is a God full of grace who offers us time and time again an invitation to turn to him. To repent.

In fact Jesus knew that our lives would be full of personal tragedies. Some caused by human agents, like Pilate, and others cause by natural disasters, like a building collapse or an earthquake. All of us can attest to our own personal tragedies. But Jesus says, don't blame God. Their purpose is not to separate the righteous from the unrighteous, the good from the bad. If these tragedies have any significance beyond our grief, then Jesus is saying that they should be used by us to turn our attention to God, or - to repent - to see in them not as God's judgement but rather as our need for God. Jesus says to those who bring the bad news, **"Unless you repent, you will perish as they did."**

Life for all of us is precarious. Life is capricious. We don't know what will happen to us next. But by turning to God, by repenting, we are assured that we can deal with whatever life brings. Augustine, one of the early church fathers once wrote that, **"Christians differ from pagans, not in the ills that befall them, but in what they do with the ills that befall them."**

What do we do with the ills that befall us?

I believe God is always there for us to turn to. God is not the watchful headmaster ready to punish, but the ever-loving parent, ready to forgive, ready to shower us all with love whether we want it or not. Repentance is waking up to that fact. And our reward does not lie in us having a good life, free from pain and suffering. (There is no such life) No, our reward if you can call it that, is in knowing God's very presence in our lives - you'll find that

that is reward enough, just having someone to turn to when everything seems so dark, so bleak.

During my training, some of you may know I spent some time at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Institute working as a chaplain. Early on, on several occasions, on my walk through the ward, I had seen a small frail woman tenderly caring for her much bigger husband, lying in a bed. I appeared drawn to them, and finally decided to go and talk with them, even though they were not on my list.

Well I saw them both a few days later, and as is often my way, I put my foot right in it. I started off by saying how wonderful they looked together, and went on to say that they must have lived a very rich and wonderful life together.

It was then that I discovered that they were Jewish, and both had been concentration camp inmates, losing parents, brothers and sisters in the camps. And if that had not been enough, the husband had been "liberated" by the Russians and had later spent time in one of Stalin's labour camps in Siberia.

And now he was dying of breast cancer. And the little Jewish wife asked me - "How can we believe in a God that would allow such things to happen?"

How indeed. I had no answer. No answer that would honour the suffering they had undergone. For I do not believe in a God that creates or condones such suffering. I could only offer to pray, to pray to the God they had lost faith in. And they allowed me to pray.

I met with them often in the ward thereafter, until he died. For me, and I hope for them, God had not abandoned them in their suffering. God was with us in our times together, sharing with each of us in our suffering. Over the few weeks I saw them I became convinced that they were turning back to God. Indeed 18 months after I had left Peter Mac., I received a phone call from the hospital. The wife was dying of cancer herself, and had asked to see me. As I prayed at her bedside, I once again became convinced, here again was a turning to God in the face of suffering - repentance.

So as we face our life, a life that will inevitably have its share of pain and suffering, I ask, are you prepared to turn back to God, to commit yourself more completely to God. To repent. Not because life will magically become easier, for it won't. - The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they hung Jesus on the cross. No, we turn back to God because it allows us to face up to what life brings us.

So this morning let us all sit quietly for a few moments and turn again to God. Let us repent....

Rev Tony Duncan
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pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au