

Third Sunday of Lent / Year A / March 15, 2020 (Fr. Giese)

When people do wrong and are caught there is often punishment that follows; something less than pleasant that is generally unwanted, and something to be endured, so that the wrong behavior is not repeated. Children may experience this when they disobey their parents and lose some of their privileges like playing video games or using their phones for a while. High school students who break the rules of their school may be suspended for a while or if the infraction is serious enough even be expelled. The same is true for college students who may face expulsion from their school. Punishment for other misdeeds in life ranges from monetary fines to loss of employment to confiscation of property or for more serious things, even jail or prison.

Simply put, we human beings employ punishment regularly for bad behavior and crimes. So, naturally, there is the tendency to believe that God does the same thing, punish bad behavior and when bad or difficult things occur we might think that somehow we are being punished by God for having done something wrong even if we can't think of anything specific that merits punishment. And people who aren't very religious and who do not practice their faith will still wonder if they are being punished by God when something bad occurs in their lives. So, it would not surprise me if there are not some people who would see the current situation in the same way, as some sort of punishment by God for bad human behavior. After all, we know that sin displeases God and there is no one without sin.

But I believe the real reason that people think that when something bad occurs to them that it is punishment by God is that it is an easy explanation. There has to be some reason that this bad thing has occurred, right? And if there is no other explanation available then maybe it is because God is the cause, for punishment.

Well, that may be the easy explanation, but it is not a very good one, at least not to Jesus as we see in the gospel for today. When the apostles see a man, who is blind and has been from birth, they immediately attribute his difficult situation to a sin that is being punished by God, either his sin or his parents' sin. Now, I don't want to be too hard on them. They were a product of their time and understanding and they had not yet experienced Jesus' resurrection. Without the belief in the resurrection it would have seemed logical to them that whatever people experienced in this life would be the result of either sin or righteousness.

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As I said, it was an easy explanation but not a very good one. Since the man was blind from birth, he would have to have been punished for sin he had not yet committed. And punishing him for his parents' sin would be cruel and inhuman. And yet they seem to think that God was willing to do both of those things, punish a child for a sin that would come later in life or punish him for his parents' sin. I think that is actually making God less than human and it does not reflect the goodness and righteousness of God that we understand and trust and Jesus dismisses that kind of reasoning. For Jesus, the encounter with the man born blind was "so that the works of God might be made visible through him."

To Jesus, every difficult situation, every hardship, was an occasion for the wonder of God's love and power to show forth. In the case of the man born blind, it was so that sight might be given him, not just to heal him but to reveal an even greater truth that seeing the world and others as God sees them is a gift, an outcome of faith in God, that is sharing the vision of God of people, things, and situations and therefore seeing them as they truly are and with understanding. And the glory of God was also revealed in his courageous witnessing to the power and holiness of Jesus that he gave in the face of people who were unable to see, unwilling to see, that God could be at work in their midst. Through it all, the man who had been born blind gave glory to God. And faith will do that for people, it will enable them to reveal the glory of God, even when, in fact most especially when, there is adversity or trials or difficulties. This is how the letter of James actually begins: 2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, [a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

And this is one of the gifts that believers have to share with the world, especially at a time like this, because there are those who are in great anxiety, who need encouragement and hope and don't know where to find them. But we do, in our faith in God. It is in times like this that we are truly called to be the light of the world as we find in our faith a source of blessing and know

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that God is with us and that God enables us to draw good from every situation just as God brought forth goodness from the very passion and death of Jesus on the cross.

Our faith in God enables us to see that trial and difficulties are not punishment or a sign of God's anger with us but the occasion to fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is the time to be generous, to be kind, to be neighborly because we belong to Christ. This is the time for us to give example by finding blessing in what we do have and not give in to frustration at what we do not have. This is the time for us to be most faithful in prayer and devotion, to make of the home and the family the domestic church and sources of holiness as God intends them to be. This is the time to open the scriptures and grow in a personal, intimate friendship with Jesus Christ, to make of this extraordinary Lenten season a time of holiness, to find in the decrease of our ordinary lives a time to allow Jesus to increase. In chapter 15 of his letter to the Romans Saint Paul expresses his hope and prayer for them and they are mine for you too. He says:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. May you believe yourselves to be richly blessed by God through your faith in Jesus Christ and know that this is the time, the hour for you to be the light of the world.”