

As our first reading tells us, God is present and at work even if we aren't aware that God's even around. Such unawareness can make Jesus's instruction in the gospel to render to God what's God's something of a challenge. How can we render anything to God if we're unaware of God, and what are we supposed to render, anyway?

Let me tell you a little story that might help with that a bit. One of the folks I see down at the gym from time to time knows that I'm a deacon. He asked me just recently what I made of the shootings in Las Vegas. "Where was God in all that, anyway?" he wanted to know. I replied that St. Theresa of Avila had observed that there are many ways to be in a place. We can be someplace aware of being in God's presence and the guy right next to us can be totally unaware that God even exists. That night, I told him, God was with everyone but not everyone was with God.

Not satisfied he asked: "How could a loving God allow something like that to happen?" I told him that our Church teaches that absolute love is not possible without absolute freedom. That means we all continually have to make choices about love in our lives, and God does not dictate the outcome – ever, despite the risk of profound evil. We can choose to render to God what's God's and return that love, or behave like the folks described in Psalm 81 "...my people did not heed my voice and Israel would not obey. So I left them in their stubbornness of heart to follow their own designs."

"If you want to know how that expression 'follow their own designs' plays out, I told him, don't stop at last week's paper – read the history of the world and its bloodbaths. Choose not to return God's love and whoa - everybody duck!"

"Oh, and your Christianity would've prevented all that?" he sneered.

"Your guess is as good as mine," I replied, "but I do agree with G.K. Chesterton that the problem with Christianity isn't that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it hasn't been

tried, certainly not by the troublemakers. Hitler was a baptized Catholic, but something inclines me to doubt that he practiced his faith with any degree of serious intent or regularity, I rather think I know who his God really was.”

“People like him aren’t aware that they have to make any kind of decision about love,” he argued. “Since they don’t believe in God there’s no offer of love to return.”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head,” I told him.

“I did?” he asked, astonished that we actually agreed about something,

“Sure – the fundamental problem is awareness,” I said.

“No it isn’t,” he replied, “it’s belief.”

“Awareness precedes belief though,” I countered.

“Awareness of what?” he asked.

“For starters, awareness of being around,” I told him. “My awareness that I exist is the stimulus for all those puzzling questions about who I am, where I am and what this is all about. Wrestling with those questions is what leads to belief, or unbelief. Believers come to find within themselves an urge to express thanks, praise and love. It’s all that God asks us to render back.”

“Sorry, Tim,” he said, “No god made me - I’m a random event.”

“No, you’re not ‘random,’ you’re a certainty,” I told him. “An enormously improbable but irrefutable certainty. Let me tell you. I used to teach graduate statistics at RPI. One day I told the students we were going to compute the probability of exactly them showing up. If you go back to your grandparents, given all the moving parts, the probability of exactly you showing up is one in several billion. When we took it all the way back to the trilobites in your family tree crawling around in the prehistoric ooze, your probability goes to roughly one in 10 to the 400-thousandth power. Compared to your being around, winning the lottery is an absolute certainty, so don’t give me this ‘I’m random’ line. Your existence is a fact. If anything, you’re a miracle.”

“There’s no such thing as a miracle,” he snorted.

“Look in the mirror some time,” I suggested. “Become aware that the distance between you and pure miracle is vanishingly small. Then, when you’re done admiring yourself, take a look around you and see if you can detect any other miracles just like you!”

“I’ll try that,” he laughed. “I think you’re nuts, but who knows?”

“If you really do try,” I suggested, “just be grateful and give thanks. You don’t even need to have an image of who it is that you’re thanking. Just do it. It’s the first step in the path towards the discovery of unconditional love. You might end up face-to-face with the surprise of your life.” “I’ll let you know how it turns out,” he said. I told him I’d be delighted to hear how it went and we went off to finish our workouts.

Just as the first reading today told of Cyrus the Persian and his experience of the God he did not know, like my friend at the gym, he was being led by God without his even knowing it. The technical term for this gift is prevenient grace. God uses Jesus, you, me and so many others to draw people into the circle of God’s love, without showing up on our radar. To be aware that God operates through us unawares like that is a gift that leads us paradoxically to even deeper awareness of the fathomless depths of God’s love.

Likewise, beneath the story of entrapment and reversal in the gospel lies an invitation. Holding up that coin, Jesus challenges his tormentors (and, parenthetically, you and me) to become aware of the love, praise and thanks that ought to be freely rendered to God. As the story unfolds, his enemies will choose not to render any such thing, any more than a certain person in Las Vegas did a week or so ago; or so many others throughout history.

You and I have the same free choice to make about rendering love, praise and thanksgiving to God that every person who has ever lived has had. Awareness of God and the decision to return God’s love as best we can is all that stands between the triumph of good and the darkest expressions of evil.