

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Hartford, Connecticut

The Third Sunday in Lent Easter, Year C (March 11, 2007) The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

Exodus 3:1-15 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Luke 13:1-9

THERE IS NO DIVINE CALCULUS FOR SIN AND SUFFERING

Because this is the season of Lent it is not unusual to find scripture readings which are particularly challenging because they depict persons in some crisis or another or confronted with suffering or anguish. Lent is the season in which we reflect upon the more difficult challenges and crises of human life, upon the testing of our faith to which we are all subjected from time to time. That is one reason why we deny ourselves, at least in theory, some of things of which we normally partake in order to experience some degree of suffering, thus empathizing with Jesus and his disciples who are slowly making their way toward Jerusalem for the last days of Jesus' life and his agonizing death.

Consistent with the theme of Lent, we see in this morning's scripture a challenge to our understanding of God's work in the world, a challenge that can bring a certain kind of psychological anguish with it. I'm referring to the passages in both Paul's letter to the Corinthians and in Jesus' words in the Gospel, both of which make reference to God's apparent involvement in the deaths of thousands of persons.

Paul reminds his listeners that in the days of Moses some of the people fell away from their covenant obligations by rising up to play or indulging in sexual immorality. And as a result, he says, 23,000 fell in a single day, implying that God was behind those deaths (as Paul says, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness). And Jesus tells his listeners that unless we repent, we will all perish as did those Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices or those who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.

It is hard to miss the suggestion in both of these texts that God bears some responsibility for these deaths, but Jesus strangely notes that those who were killed by the falling tower were not worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem. I think that comment should be challenging to our faith because we have come to believe that God is a God of love, not of destruction, that God does not willfully cause the deaths of his creatures. Jesus even seems to imply that there was no compelling reason, certainly not a greater degree of sinfulness, for God to have caused the deaths of some and not of others presumably equally guilty of sin.

But this implication goes against our fundamental belief that instead of causing the deaths of his created sons and daughter, God himself chose to die for them and for us through his Son Jesus Christ while we were yet guilty of sinning. If this is the central meaning of the text, it is not clear on what basis God has selected some for destruction while others, no more innocent or guilty, are permitted to survive.

What, we ask ourselves, is the divine calculus at work here? This becomes a particularly pressing question in this time of Lenten reflections because we are being encouraged to think about those ways in which we have obstructed, refused, or hidden from God's will in order to pursue our own interests. During this season more than at any other time in the church year we engage in penitential prayer recalling our obstinacy or indifference to God and to other people.

But how then are we to take the stories of the deaths of these thousands of persons in the two readings from this morning? One way, I think, is to accept the reality of the human condition as it is: if we read the texts carefully we can tease out a view that observes that all people, good and bad, guilty and innocent, suffer many of the same misfortunes from time to time. And these calamities are not carefully calibrated to the degree of sinfulness in the persons who suffer from them. Christians are no more exempt from them than non-Christians. Paul says explicitly “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.” God does not seem to manifest his blessings on the faithful by keeping us from the difficult challenges of life which virtually everyone experiences in some form or another.

Now it is abundantly true that some of us suffer far more than others: some are given burdens most of us shudder even at imagining, let alone experiencing. The terrible, heart-wrenching stories of people subjected to severe unremitting pain, suffering, disaster, and calamity cause all of us to shrink back in horror. These are often so terrible that it is beyond the abilities of the preacher to try to put them in words because to do so is almost to trivialize them, to bring them within the orbit of what is capable of being understood and handled. But how can words convey the literally unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust, or the pain of terminal cancer, or the deaths and abuse of children or the sufferings of the victims of rape or war? No words can do justice to the experience of this kind of suffering. The only words that seem capable of escaping our lips in the face of such tragedies are “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Where are you, God?”

Now there is certainly one response to these catastrophic situations that we should avoid at all costs: and that is to proclaim that it is our lack of faith, or our failure to live a sin-free life that has brought these disasters upon us. No, as Paul says, everyone is subject to testing. No one escapes suffering of some kind. And as Jesus says, those who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them were no worse sinners than all the others. No, there is something in the human condition as such that causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. It is enough to know that we participate fully in the universal conditions of a deeply fallen world. We do not stand outside those conditions in hermetically sealed vessels. But to equate our personal suffering with specific sins we may have committed is a gross violation of God’s compassion for his people.

There has been too much psychological damage done to people by demanding that they equate their previous failures in life with the calamities from which they are presently suffering. [This is not to say that there is no link between sin and suffering: perhaps had no one sinned ever, had human beings always remained faithful to God from the beginning of the human race, we would not suffer from the horrors that now afflict us. But this is a collective failure of the human race. To say to an individual, your sinfulness has brought on you your cancer or the death of your children is cruel and insidious in the extreme].

But we earlier left the question hanging: where is God when suffering strikes? Here I think we have to turn once again to some of the most hopeful words in all of Scripture: the final words of Paul in this morning’s epistle. Immediately after he has assured his listeners that testing is common to everyone, he proclaims what I have always found to be the most incredibly comforting words possible: “God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” With these words Paul reverses or simply bypasses the natural human tendency to develop a formula for determining who and why some will suffer more than others. That is not the relevant question, Paul reminds us.

The question is: where is God? And the answer is, not as the one meting out suffering to those who deserve it, but rather as the one who is present with the sufferer. God is the one who will give us the strength to take on the suffering that befalls us and to endure it in hope and trust. We simply do not know the strength that other people have been given by God to bear sufferings that we cannot imagine ourselves bearing. What we can know is that while we cannot see into their souls and know what they are capable of, God can, and God will give them whatever they need, provided they are not closed to his presence, to bear up and to live through the burdens they carry.

The good news is that God will not test us beyond the strength we have and that he will give us the strength we need, when we need it, to bear up under the challenges that come inevitably with simply being human in a fallen world. It is absolutely useless speculation to figure out why one person is afflicted and another is not: it is cruel and callous to inflict some kind of moral calculus on them hoping to get them to equate their specific sins with their particular affliction. By God's grace our attention should be shifted to an awareness of God's love and grace that are available to each of us in our moments of affliction and suffering, and to know that with that awareness comes the sure and certain knowledge that God will be present to us and with us so that no suffering can ultimately separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

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