

3rd Sunday in Lent – Year C

In our Gospel from Luke, for this Third Sunday of Lent in Year C, Jesus addresses a widespread and ancient understanding of the problem of evil. We often hear or ask ourselves, why do bad things happen to good people? Humanity has attempted to understand the reasons behind evil from the beginning of time.

One such way to understand the problem of evil is the concept of retribution, which believes that personal sin or bad actions will lead to negative outcomes, this theme is common in many cultures and religions including Judaism. The book of Job wrestled with this idea, as Job's friends attempted to blame Job for secret sinfulness for his negative lot in life. During the time of Jesus, suffering was often considered as God's punishment for sins committed.

According to the concept of retribution, there is cosmic or universal justice or divine punishment for personal sin. Some belief systems, like Hinduism and Buddhism, explicitly incorporate the concept of karma, where actions have consequences, both positive and negative, that affect the future of both the current life and possible future existences.

Even without a belief in a supernatural system, many people hold the view that individuals are responsible for their moral actions and that these actions can have consequences, both for themselves and others. At times, human beings know what they should and should not do, but lack the self-control or the motivation to do what is right and good.

Some aspects of this ancient belief of retribution is true, even according to Christianity. In today's Gospel, Jesus clearly says, unless you repent you will all perish – very difficult words to take in. Our actions do have consequences, both

for this life and the life to come. If we continue to sin against God and others, there will be negative consequences. It's not so much that God will punish us if we sin, but we punish ourselves, when we walk away from God and sin against his law, we inflict punishment on ourselves. God has given us free will to choose good and evil. When we are disobedient to God and his life-giving commandments, we put ourselves in harm's way.

Christianity claims that all human beings have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. While there is goodness within every human being, every person is also broken, sinful, and thus in need of a saviour. Even a baby that comes into this world, with no personal sins of its own will be broken given he or she is born into a dysfunctional world. For example, think of an unborn baby of a mother who is addicted to a substance. Along with nutrients, any toxins in the mother's system may be delivered to the fetus. These toxins may cause damage to the developing fetal organs. The baby also may become dependent on substances used by the mother and have short- or long-term effects biologically. Obviously, this is not the fault of the baby, that he or she comes to this world with biological addictions to substances. Not. It is passed on from the mother.

Now think about the psychological and spiritual brokenness of parents, guardians extended family, and friends that could affect their baby as he or she grows up, genes pass on much more than just biology. We pass, on all biopsychosocial and spiritual aspects of ourselves to our children. This is a very short explanation of the concept of 'original sin' if you like. No one of us is immune from the general brokenness of humanity that we are born into. The Bible calls this general brokenness, Sin or Original Sin. That is why every person born needs a Saviour. And there is only one candidate in human history for that JOB... and it is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This is why we begin our healing and saving process with Baptism, even when we are babies. Today Ledger will be baptised and there will be a prayer and a blessing asking God to forgive and take away original sin from him as he begins his Christian Journey. His Parents and God's parents will be charged to teach him the ways of God and the teaching of Christ to help Ledger grow into the Child and Man God wants him to be. This is at the heart of our Christian Faith.

One of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of Christianity is that if we follow Christ we take our faith and the Bible seriously, we will somehow lose something good in life. There is a fear within people that if they embrace Christianity God will take the fun out of life and make them miserable. This cannot be further from the truth. God is for us, he is for life, he is for joy and happiness that lasts. God is the creator of life and he can be trusted. This is what is communicated so beautifully in our first reading.

The great Old Testament Figure Moses is shown a burning bush in the Wilderness. However, while he sees this bush on fire it is not being burnt up or consumed. So he decides to investigate as he says to himself, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why this bush is not burnt." From the Bush, God speaks to him asking him to take his shoes off since he is standing on Holy Ground. This burning bush is a good analogy for a Christian! When we embrace our faith in Jesus Christ and embrace God and his law, our personality and uniqueness will not be consumed, or burned up. Rather, we will become on a path to be enlightened and become the best version of ourselves because God will enhance our lives. God's love is a fire that does not burn us but makes us bright. His purifying fire consumes only our darkness, sinfulness, and brokenness and gives us wisdom, peace, joy, and hope.

When Moses asks God's name God answers "I am who I am". Arguably the most important verse in the whole of the Old Testament. By not giving a name like all other gods and deities of the ancient world, God is saying he is not yet another being like everyone and everything else. He is not yet another God, he is not yet another deity, he is who brings every other being into life. In a philosophical term, he is the condition possibility for life – without God, nothing exists as he holds everyone and everything in being. So, God is not in competition against us, he is not yet another being who asks for our attention, rather he is for us and our Good. He is not in competition with the world. We just need to trust Him with our lives.

The atheistic objection is that if God is so loving and good why does he allow terrible calamities to befall people? Particularly the Natural disasters, for which there is no easy black-and-white answer, but an invitation to ponder the mystery of life and its brokenness and fragility. The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it. *As Christians, we believe that the only answer to this profound question lies in having faith in the Risen Christ, who overcame death and evil through his obedience to his Father's will.*

Thus, today's Gospel is really about God's loving care and patience. Jesus takes the opportunity to explain that the recent deaths of both Galileans (whom Pilate executed) and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (who died in an accident) did not mean that they were any more sinful than others. They did not deserve death any more than anyone else. All who sin deserve death, the wages of sin is death says the Bible. Therefore, we must not look to the sinfulness of others but to our own need for repentance and accept the underserved forgiveness God offers through Jesus Christ.

In the Scriptures, the Vineyard is often used as a symbol of Israel, God's people. God is depicted as the owner of the vineyard, and he attends to it with great care – planting, cultivating, feeding, and pruning the vines to make them fruitful and abundant. The parable with the vineyard owner depicts God's infinite patience with the sinfulness of humans. The Fig Tree in today's Gospel is also given more time to bear fruit before it is cut down.

Despite our failings, God will graciously give us time to produce our best fruit with the help of his Holy Fire. The theme of our Gospel then is his forgiveness, patience and mercy. Lent is of course a special time of preparation and repentance. Instead of judging others, let us continue to ask God to forgive our sins and help us with his holy presence as we attempt to live our Christian life as faithfully as possible and glorify God with our lives.