

IS SUFFERING PUNISHMENT?

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him. John 9:3

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. If it was a musical score, Lent would be written in a minor key. Lent calls us to a quiet time of introspection and prayer. It is the season of the year for reflecting on the Passion of Jesus. We ponder the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death.

In planning last year for this Lent. We thought, considering the events of the last year, to focus on the meaning of suffering in our lives.

At the end of Lent last spring, Ross Douthat began a column in the New York Times with these words:

Notwithstanding the fond hopes of our president, the pandemic that spread around the world during the Christian season of Lent isn't ending miraculously as Good Friday gives way to Easter Sunday. The churches remain empty, and the long Lent imposed by the coronavirus will continue for months to come.

Still, the turn to Easter is an appropriate time to ponder meaning amid the death and suffering worldwide.

When those words were written over ten months ago, we all hoped that we would be back to normal by summer. But the pandemic did not fade away. In this last year the suffering around the world had been overwhelming.

In the past year over 2.4 million people have lost their lives to Covid. Millions have lost their jobs. Businesses have closed for ever. School children have lost almost two years of their education. College students missed out on graduations and the freshmen experience. Families have experienced increased stress from working at home and trying to monitor their children's online attempts at learning. We have seen increases in abuse of alcohol and drugs. Maybe the most painful truth has been the increase of what are called deaths of despair. There has been a spike in suicides and drug overdoses by people who have lost all hope.

How are we as Christians to respond to this calamity that has caused so much human suffering. Our first response should not be to seek an explanation for it all. Writing in *Time* magazine last Lent, Anglican theologian N.T. Wright wrote: **Instead of seeking explanations for our present disaster, we should "recover the biblical tradition of lament," an expression of solidarity with our fellow humans and with**

God himself, who in the Old Testament grieves for his people's infidelity and in the person of Jesus weeps for Lazarus. The Christian tradition doesn't require us to "explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain — and to lament instead."

Wright is telling us that our first task as Christians is to weep with those who suffer and even complain to God about all that has happened. The Lament has a rich Biblical tradition. Lamentations 5 tells us:

**But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
²⁰ Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?
²¹ Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;
renew our days as of old—
²² unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.**

So, the first reaction of a Christian to suffering is lament and a cry for help. Following lament and the passage of time we begin to ask questions of meaning. One of the most human responses to suffering is to believe it is punishment for sin. Many of the contemporaries of Jesus held this understanding of the faith. In our Gospel Lesson for today we read the story of the man born blind who encounters Jesus. Jesus' disciples asked him a simple question, "Who sinned the man or his parents?" The disciples thought that someone had to be at fault.

We see this same dynamic at work everyday in ways big and small. We see it on a global scale such as 9/11. There were fundamentalist preachers who claimed the terrorist that day were instruments of God's judgment on America for allowing things such as abortion. We experience it every day when a person receives a bad medical report and they ask why me? They wonder what must they have done to deserve this. Almost all of us at some point in our lives believe that our lives are going well because we are good and then when life throws us a curve it must mean we have done something wrong.

In the Gospels Jesus dispels this simplistic understanding when he said, "**For He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.**" Jesus is reminding us that the natural world is not ordered to bless those who are good and punish those who are bad. The good suffer and prosper along with the bad. Jesus teaches the clear truth that Christianity does not promise to save us from all suffering.

To be honest, I should point out that there is a tension found in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Book of Deuteronomy would seem to promise that if you are good, God will protect you from all evil and if you are bad you will be punished. This simple formula led many to think that wealth was an indication of goodness, and poverty meant that you were bad.

There are many Christians who have not heard this message of our Lord. It is very possible that the Blue Jays may play in Buffalo again this year. The conditions in Buffalo are very different than at the Rogers Center. In Buffalo you sit outside exposed to the weather whatever it might be. In Toronto if the weather is beautiful you sit outside. If storms or cold weather threaten the Dome is closed and you are protected from the elements. There are many people who teach and believe in what I call Sky Dome Christianity. Sky Dome Christians seem to believe that our faith in Christ puts us in the same situation as fans watching a Blue Jays game in Toronto. If life is going well, if all is sunny, beautiful and warm, then God allows us to experience life as it is. But, if storm clouds gather and sickness and pain threaten, God will then close the dome and protect his faithful people from real life and all its problems.

My friends, that is not the message of Jesus. We do not suffer because we do not have enough faith. We do not get cancer because we are bad people. We do not mourn the loss of a child because we lack faith. The men and women who have died from Covid in nursing homes were not all bad people and the ones who were able to escape are not all saints. The rain falls on the just and the unjust equally.

One of my favorite writers is Simone Weil. After her death at the age of 34 in 1943, these words were found scribbled in a notebook.

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.

In these words, Weil reminds us that Christ does not promise to save us from all suffering. In the Gospels Jesus affirms this same truth. He reminds us that there is pain and suffering in the world. When we have lived for any number of years, we know this is true. We know that we are material beings. We are part of the physical natural world we are subject to the laws of nature. We are exposed to microbes and viruses, to aging and to death. We encounter realities that we cannot always avoid. When we read the paper and watch the news, we are reminded of people suffering through loss, poverty, violence and war.

Suffering teaches us that we are all human beings. We are part of nature and suffering is part of life.

Weil teaches us that while Christianity does not protect from all suffering it can help us find meaning and purpose in it. Over the course of the Lenten season we are going to explore supernatural uses for suffering in our lives. We can understand suffering to be an opportunity for growth, a process of refinement and a way to connect humanity. God can use suffering to help us grow.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells his disciples **Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him.**

The suffering of this man would find meaning in revealing who Jesus really was. His suffering played a role in God's plan in the world.

This is not an easy answer to accept. We crave easy answers, we want to believe that there are obvious reasons why people prosper or suffer. Jesus tells us that this is not the case. One ancient commentator on this passage tells us: **The Lord taught the disciples that there are many reasons for all these events and that they are certainly secret and unexplainable. This knowledge will be given to us in the future world, because what is hidden now will be revealed to us.**

The suffering of the man born blind found meaning in his encounter with Jesus. It has been the experience of Christians through time that suffering can teach us new truths and lead us into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Weil wrote **the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.** She wrote these words because suffering led her into the presence of God.

During much of her life, Weil suffered from intense migraine headaches. She had discovered a poem by George Herbert on the nature of divine love. She had learned this poem by heart and would recite it during her suffering. In 1938 during a horrific headache she had an experience that she related to a friend in a letter in these words:

Often at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations, that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me.

I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.

Suffering is not a punishment, but rather a teacher that can become a pathway to Christ.

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him.