

SINS OF THE FATHER



John 9.1: "As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'"

There is an ancient Persian proverb which reads, "If you see a blind man on the road, kick him!" That's right, kick him. For why should you be any kinder to him than God has been, says the proverb? In other words, if you see someone who is suffering, you need to understand that he or she deserves their fate, and that God wants them to suffer, or else why would they be suffering? Therefore, put yourself on God's side by humiliating or shunning the blind man further. According to this

proverb, if you try to help those who are suffering, you will be opposing God's will.

Now most of us, I hope, would find that proverb rather harsh, if not outright mean and cruel. We usually believe that one of the worst things that can happen to a person who has been injured by life is further rejection by those around them, like the lonely woman at the well in Samaria in last week's Gospel. Nevertheless, too often we instinctively do or say the wrong thing when confronted with someone who is suffering, and we often end up compounding their injury. As a priest I have seen it happen many times, where we inadvertently say to people who are hurting, that they in some way or another deserve what they have gotten in life. We all do it, all too often.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his wonderful book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, retells a story of a woman after the tragic death of her only son, where her clergy person took her aside and tried to comfort her with these words; "I know that this is a painful time for you," he said, "But I also know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because God knows that you are strong enough to handle it." Whereupon the woman in the story, with tears in her eyes and her shoulders shaking in grief, said to the priest, "you mean if

only I had been a weaker person, then my son would still be alive?"

Sometimes in our efforts to comfort those who are suffering or to explain their tragedy ourselves, we inflict additional wounds upon them. Often, we just try minimizing their pain by saying foolish things like "you're not really hurt that bad" or "it's probably for the better" or "it could have been a lot worse." Other times we unwittingly criticize those who are suffering by saying something like "oh, don't take it so hard" or "come on, try to hold back your tears, don't cry" or "get ahold of yourself!" Sometimes we ignore the reality of their tragedy. The popular religious writer, Robin Meyers tells the story of one pastor who counseled the grieving widow by declaring that Jesus obviously needed her husband in heaven, to which the woman, "Great! So is Jesus going to pay the rent now?" Occasionally we just try to explain away their hurt with answers that demand that they deny or reject their true feelings and pain, saying things like "there must have been a purpose why this has happened" or "there's always a reason" or "God has a plan" or "we have no right to question God's judgment."

Do you remember Job's comforters, those three friends of his who came to visit Job in his distress after the death of his wife and children and the loss of all that he had, friends who genuinely wanted to comfort him in the midst of his losses and

illness, but they did almost everything wrong with their platitudes, and ended up make Job feel worse, and angry. We so often do the same thing.

For the ancients believed that one's suffering in life was related to one's sin. Sometimes however the ancients' theory didn't seem to fit the reality they experienced, so it was necessary to assume that on occasion you sinned, and it was your children who suffered for it, even to the fifth generation they said. "The parents have eaten sour grapes," repeated both the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, "yet it is the children's teeth which are set on edge." We sometimes suffer then, they said, because of the sins of others. So, Jesus' disciples' question in today's Gospel is not an unusual one. A man is born blind. Why? Has he sinned? Is that why he is born blind? Indeed, if his blindness is because of *his* sin, and he was born blind, did he sin even before he was born? Or is he born blind because of the sins of his parents, they earnestly asked.

But those very questions, like so many of our responses to those who suffer, reveal our hidden understandings or assumptions about God. Far too often, I think, we assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and then we try to understand why God would want us to suffer so. Is it for our own good perhaps, to make us stronger, --- or is it a punishment we deserve for something we or someone else has done, --- or could

it be that God simply does not care what happens to us at all? Many of the theological answers we devise in response to our suffering are religiously imaginative, and I have heard most of them, but none of them really satisfies the needs of those who are hurting. Some of those pat answers lead us to blame ourselves, in order to spare God's reputation. Others ask us to deny reality or to repress our true feelings. We are so often left either hating ourselves for deserving such a fate, or hating God for sending us such a fate that we don't deserve.

Perhaps there is another way, one which accepts random suffering and pain as a part of the mystery of life. Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us? Could it be that God doesn't decide which families shall give birth to a handicapped child, that God did not single out this person or that one to be crippled by a random shooting or a degenerative disease, that it was not the sins of the parents or the person that cause his or her suffering, but rather instead, ---- that God stands ready to help us cope with our tragedies, if we could only get beyond the feelings of guilt and rage that so often separate us from the love of God? Could it be that God does not look at these things the way we do? For we look at the outward appearances, while the Lord looks at the heart, as exemplified in today's story from the book of Samuel and the choosing of David to be king. Could it be that "How could God do this to

me?" is really the wrong question for us to ask? Perhaps the right question is 'where is God in the midst of our suffering?' And 'what good can come from this?'

It is embarrassing at times not to have quick and easy answers to the questions about suffering in our lives. In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very difficult issues and concerns, where perhaps we should no longer ask why something has happened, but instead ask how will we respond to this tragedy, what do we intend to do now that it has happened, is this an occasion for healing or reconciliation? Are we capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed us by not being perfect, as we are not perfect --- for we live a world in which there is so much injustice and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquakes and floods and wars? Can we forgive each other our imperfections that cause so much of our suffering --- and love one another because we know that we are all capable of great beauty and goodness? And are we capable of forgiving and loving God even when we have found out that God permits bad luck and sickness and cruelty and blindness to exist in the world? For I have learned that however well received any of our theological answers are to these questions, they are never better received than a sympathetic hand and an understanding heart. Therein lies, in our compassion for one

another, the true power of God to heal us, and to redeem us, and there is no better image for such compassion and redemption than that of Jesus suffering upon the Cross. As we approach Holy Week, let us be mindful of Jesus' example of enduring great suffering for the greater good that can come from it, in our lives, and in the lives of others. AMEN