

A MAN BORN BLIND



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?'"

The question raised by today's reading from the Gospel of John is: what exactly is the relationship between what happens to us in life and how good we are? For much of the Old Testament there was a basic assumption that if you lived a good life, that is, if you followed the Law and the Commandments and kept the Holy Days, then your life would be blessed; your crops would flourish, your flocks would multiply, and you would have a long life and

lots of children. This was the so-called Deuteronomic Covenant that Moses promised, that began to be seriously questioned by the Jews surrounding the Exile in Babylon, questions which plagued the people of Israel for generations and generations thereafter, basic ponderings about why bad things sometimes happen to good people, questions that were never really successfully answered.

Our New England Puritan forebears often perceived themselves much like the nation of Israel, a chosen race, a destined people, founding now a New Jerusalem here in America, a shining city built upon a hill, in a new promised land. The United States was settled, and to a significant degree shaped, by those who brought with them a very special form of Protestantism. Among other things, these Calvinists believed strongly in the biblical principle of predestination, in a manifest destiny for themselves and for this country. And they found strong support for their views in the Deuteronomic Promise of the Old Testament.

For not all were predestined to be among the Chosen People, not all were among the Elect, not all who cry out "Lord, Lord," will be saved, as Jesus himself noted. So, like the Israelites before them, these early Americans, these Calvinists, asked that most difficult of questions, how does one know who is saved and who is not? This question haunted our Pilgrim ancestors for many years, and in a sense, has haunted this nation ever since. For it was surely not good works that evidenced one's salvation, said

these Protestants Reformers, for the principal of good works was "a Romish doctrine, a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God," according to our Anglican 39 Articles in the back of your Prayerbook. No, we are justified by faith, apart from works prescribed by the law, said Paul.

So, the question remained, how then can we tell whether we are faithful or not? Whether we are saved or not? Whether we are part of the Chosen ones and have God's blessing, or God's curse? And what did our Puritan forebears do in answer to this question; they fell back upon the old failed Deuteronomic Promise. You had only to look around you to see who was saved and who was not, they said. For God looks with favor upon the righteous: their crops do well, their livestock flourishes, their families prosper. There is the evidence of God's blessing! There is the proof that you are part of the predestined Chosen ones.

And so, to see to it that their crops did do well, and that their herds did flourish, and that their family did prosper and was seen in the community as righteous and upstanding, those Puritans worked hard in their fields, very hard indeed. And thus, was born the so-called Protestant Work Ethic. There in the failed Deuteronomic Promise lies much of the basis of the American Spirit and the Capitalistic Dream. Work hard and God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings. Work hard and you

will become a leader of the community. Work hard and you will be blessed. For those who prosper are righteous in the eyes of God, they say.

Sadly, as a result of this belief, this nation still views suspiciously those upon whom hard times have fallen, often suspecting that the poor are really lazy and ignorant and undeserving of God's blessing. We still often believe in this Nation that everyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps; that God will favor our hard work; thus those who are down on their luck in some way or another must actually deserve what they get, that they are to blame for their own misfortune; that the poor and downtrodden are really just poor and downtrodden, not because of the circumstances of their birth or their race or their culture, but because they deserve to be. We pretend to still believe that good things don't happen to bad people. So obviously the poor and downtrodden are not blessed by God because they have not prospered; and prosperity, hard work, and keeping the law are the signs of God's favor according to the Deuteronomic Promise.

Interestingly, the Deuteronomic Promise is also evident in the Gospel reading today. Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' For someone had to have sinned for him to be born blind, according to the Deuteronomic Promise. But Jesus answered, "Neither this man

nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." So what did Jesus mean by that?

So why then do terrible things happen to some people, but not others? And why do terrible things sometimes happen to us? For far too often, we, like Jesus' disciples, 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, is it a test, or is it a punishment we deserve, or is it so that God's works might be revealed in us, or could it be that God does not care what happens to us? Many of the answers that we humans have devised over the centuries in response to the suffering of life are sensitive and religiously imaginative, but none of them ever seems to totally satisfy. So many of those clever answers require us to blame ourselves for our suffering --- seemingly in order to spare God's reputation. We must have gotten what we deserved, we think. Other responses ask us to deny the reality of what has happened to us, to pretend that it isn't really that bad, or to repress our real feelings. We so often are left either hating ourselves for deserving such a terrible fate, or hating God for sending such us a fate which we do not deserve.

In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul tries to reassure the Christians at Corinth, who are suffering, that God is faithful, and that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out, so that we may be able

to endure it. So then, do we think that God "temper the wind for the shorn sheep" as the old adage goes? Does God never ask more of us than we can endure?

My experience as a priest, alas, has been otherwise. I have seen people crack under the strain of unbearable tragedies. I have seen lives destroyed after the death of a child, because parents blamed one another for not taking proper care, or for not foreseeing the oncoming tragedy, or for carrying the defective gene that caused it all. I have seen marriages break up simply because the memories the couple share became too painful to endure. Sure, I have also seen some people made noble and sensitive through suffering, but I have seen other people grow cynical and bitter. I have seen people become painfully jealous of those around them who are more fortunate than them. I have seen people emotionally paralyzed and unable to resume the routines of normal life. I have seen cancers, or bullets, or automobile accidents affect the life of one member of a family, and functionally destroy the lives of all the others, who could never again become the normal, happy people they once were.

If God is actually just testing us, God must know by now that many of us fail the test. If God is only giving us burdens that we can bear, I have seen God miscalculate far too often. St. Paul is wrong; God does not always provide a way out so that we are able to understand and endure our personal pain and suffering. Life is

hard, sometimes too hard, and what we all need is the support and care of others to sustain us. Otherwise, we may lose ourselves in the midst of some ongoing painful reality that haunts us, that gnaws at our souls over time, often causing us to numb the pain by drinking or drugs, or psychotic escape.

We are not, I think, called upon to necessarily understand why things go the way they go, why some people bear good fruit or not. Instead, I think Jesus wants us to comfort and support one another, that God's works of love and mercy might be revealed in us, as Jesus told his disciples, especially for those who are suffering, without any assurance that that will do the trick, that that will 'fix' the problem, but because this is simply what we are called to do as Christians, to be with one another in the midst of our tragedies and failures, to comfort one another --- not to have all the answers, but only to be a loving and caring presence.

So, what do we say to our friends who are suffering. Surely, we should not withdraw from our friends and family in their time of need, just because we don't know what to say. And so, I suggest that we simply speak the truth, in love. Life is hard. Things that happen are often tragic. It is sad. No platitudes about how there must be a reason. That God has a plan. That this is all for the better. Just an honest facing of life head on, together, in community with one another. I have learned over the years that

however well received any of our clever theological answers are, they are never better received than a sympathetic shoulder and an understanding heart. Therein lies the true redemptive power of God, and there is no better image of that kind of compassion, than that of our Savior suffering upon the Cross, for us. Our God indeed reveals his almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. AMEN.