

Lent 3 Year C 2019

We are within sight of our yearly exploration of the Passion of Jesus Christ, when we engage with the texts reminding us of the centrality of self-giving love at the heart of our Faith. We will read and hear two Gospel accounts (John and one of the synoptic Gospels in turn), and in each we are given some insight into the character of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. This will remind us that the Holy Land was under enemy occupation at the time, controlled by the iron fist of Rome through which Pilate held great power. In the Gospel accounts, we can appreciate his unjust treatment and the way in which he seemed to take a coward's approach in his ultimate judgement of the Lord. In fact, we have a rather fuller picture of his complexed personality from the Jewish historian Josephus, from whom we hear that Pilate went out of his way during his tenure as Governor to upset the religious sensibilities of the Jewish people in his charge.

In our Gospel reading today we hear Jesus referring to an example of Pilate's actions. There had obviously been some incident at the Temple involving Galileans. The Galileans particularly sought to undermine the Romans – they were known to be hot-heads- and some were obviously executed either within the Temple compound or their blood used sacrificially on the orders of Pilate. Either way, it would have been grossly abhorrent to any Jewish person, totally contrary to the laws of Torah and gives us some idea of Pontius Pilate's psyche.

Jesus responds to this shocking action by responding by anticipating their thoughts and turns it into a question about suffering. 'Why have these people suffered and what have they done to deserve this terrible death and the further blasphemous action using their blood? Surely there a reason for it?' The people with Jesus will have the same age-old question at the back of their minds and we do whenever anything terrible occurs within the world. Why?

Whilst Jesus talks of repentance (of which more anon) he almost perversely seems to heap more anxiety on those listening. He reminds them of a local disaster – the fall of a tower at Siloam on the edge of the city, which killed eighteen people. Again, he asks the question, 'Why them? Why not other people in Jerusalem?' In some ways this is an even more difficult situation to answer. It is random and senseless.

Both examples have resonances for us today. We will all have been horrified at the thought of people innocently attending their places of worship in Christchurch NZ ending up shot by a white-supremacist. This wilful example offers a single example of the terrible man-made sufferings of broken humanity, from the barbarism of the so-called Islamic State, to the wicked murder of a little three-year old in Scotland. Then we have random events – the collapse of the school in Lagos, together with the unfolding catastrophe of the aftermath of the storm which has struck Southern Africa.

Why? Where is God in this? Jesus responds to the deep-seated anxieties which people have yet he **doesn't** offer some pat answer about the question of suffering. He doesn't produce some high-blown theological theory about divine punishment or retribution. In fact, he offers no solution to the question of suffering and death other than saying that it happens to

good and bad alike. In other words, the afflictions of life are just a fact of human experience. So in responding, he doesn't for a moment say that all will be well now that he is actively proclaiming the Kingdom and that such things won't happen again. However, their concerns are not dismissed as events of no concern or a waste of time for consideration, but neither does he seem to offer words of comfort.

In fact, the answers we require about suffering of any kind which so desperately trouble us can't be reduced to a sentence, or, in modern parlance, to a tweet or soundbite. Jesus responds to the human suffering revealed in two tragic events by offering a radical invitation. He invites the people to focus their minds and to seek repentance. The Greek word used in the Gospels is *metanoia*, and although it is usually translated as repentance, it literally means 'a change of mind,' – a continual process of seeking to look at the world through eyes of faith. Jesus calls us to seek to be of the same mind as him, who, in words from Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians*

'though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.' (2: 5-11)

These astonishing words (probably originally some early form of Baptismal rite of the earliest Christians) of identification with our own human experiences are a call to remember our baptismal lives as Christians, a life-long journey and call to seek to be bound up in the love of God – to be signs of unconquerable hope in a broken world.

So - as to suffering – does God visit punishment on people in the form of disasters or lay people low with sickness: cancer, mental ill-health or any of those terrible afflictions which each of us so fear? Even though there is a running theme through our Scriptures of this understanding, in fact this is the human response. Our Sacred Texts are God-inspired but written by humans responding with human emotion to given situations. Does the Divine One have a hand in anything of the sort? You often hear that phrase, 'It's God's will.'

No. It is not God's will. Things just happen: a person gets radicalised, a building is shoddily built and collapses, a storm system develops on our restless planet, Things so wrong with our bodies because they are complexed eco-systems also affected by the world around them.

However, what I can unequivocally say is that in each situation, in each person involved, God is present in boundless love and wants us to know of this journeying with us. I can say this because of Jesus experienced the very things we experience. As we approach Holy Week and Easter, Jesus will display the physical 'God' answers to suffering, and through his sense of abandonment and death on a cross, leads us into the mystery of Divine Love which

lies at the heart of each of us through his Resurrection Life. Through Passion, Death and Resurrection (*again, Phillipans:*)

God highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Don't think of these as mere high-flown words. Read the whole passage (*Philippians 2: 5-11*) and you will see God's identification through Jesus with our own journeys, together with the knowledge that we are never alone. Jesus calls us to constant *metanoia* – continual transformation. This should inform every interaction we have with the world. In continually turning Godward, we are called to proclaim that no matter what, Jesus reveals that God is **always** with us, longing to reveal the depth of Divine Love not just **to** us, but **through** us to all those we meet, in every experience of our lives. Here. Inside. Now.



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Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

³ Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

I Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,^[a] that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ^[b] to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰ And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

¹¹ These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹² So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

¹³ No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

⁶ Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"' ⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"