

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Mar 8th 2017

“A clean heart create for me , O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me” (Ps 51:12-13).

Where is God in human suffering? Is there a more profound mystery in human life? And today because of electronic media we are acutely aware of suffering of millions occasioned by political and religious conflicts. Millions of our fellow human beings are risking their lives fleeing from hostile environments. Our hearts are tortured by scenes of desperate refugee families seeking safe havens.

How does our faith help us cope? It is important to note the crucial difference between the Old Testament and New Testament approaches.

The narrative of Jonah and the Ninevites from the Book of Jonah illustrates the dominant Old Testament approach. God made a covenant with the Hebrews through Moses on Mt. Sinai. The First Commandment of the covenant prohibits the worship of false gods. The Commandment specifies both the rewards and punishments resulting from observance and non-observance this commandment: “. . . for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments”(Ex 20:4-5).

Old Testament Covenant Theology is stark: fidelity to the Covenant guaranteed rewards from God; infidelity guaranteed punishment. The Ninevites had sinned grievously and God sent Jonah to proclaim punishment for these sins. But at the preaching of Jonah the Ninevites repented and God therefore withdrew the threatened punishment. Please note that God’s rewards and punishments occur in this life since at the time there was no belief in an afterlife.

God’s role in human suffering in the Old Testament question is clear: God sends suffering as a warning and a punishment for violating the Covenant. In this framework the appropriate response regarding suffering is simple: What have we done to deserve this?

Please note that the New Testament presents an entirely different approach. Jesus’ proclamation of Good News announces the coming of a new dimension of life through the sending of the Holy Spirit,. This new life is imparted through faith and baptism. Paul calls this new life a “new creation.” And the Holy Spirit not only strengthens believers in trials here on earth but also guarantees a continuation of life after death.

In short, the New Testament does not present suffering as a punishment from God. The New Testament exhorts believers to remember that God remains present even amid suffering. Indeed the New Testament witnesses that the power of God is manifested even more starkly in suffering. Paul reiterates this truth throughout his epistles. Indeed in his letter to the Corinthians we even find Paul boasting in his suffering so that the power of God made be manifested in him!

Jesus in the gospels invites all those who labor and are burden to come to him. And Jesus on the cross is the exemplar of trusting in God amid suffering.

For Christians the appropriate response to suffering is simple. We love our neighbor as ourselves and do what we can to alleviate suffering. And ultimately trusting in the Holy Spirit, we kneel before the crucifix and pray: Help us , O Lord!

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