

Sermon for Proper 24, Year B
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
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“Why do bad things happen to good people?” That’s the way most people ask the question. It was also the way the question was posed in the title of the famous book written by Rabbi Harold Kushner in 1981. Of course, there is a wise-guy answer which reveals the faulty basis of the question, and that is to remember Jesus’ words to the rich young man in our Gospel reading from last week. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” So the wise-guy answer is this: Why do bad things happen to good people? Simple, there are no good people except God himself.

But the wise-guy answer doesn’t really satisfy, does it? There is a legitimate question of justice here. In other words, I may not be good in the absolute sense, I may not be good like God is, but do I really deserve *this*?! Ultimately, there may be no human answer to the question, “Why me?” But there is an answer to the pain and suffering in the world. And that answer comes in the form of the only man who is God, Jesus the Christ.

Our psalm today was quoted by Satan at his temptation of Our Lord in the wilderness. It assumes that the righteous are protected by God and achieve their destiny without suffering, whereas the wicked suffer as recompense of their sins. The temptation, evidently, was for Jesus to abort his mission and test God, to see whether God would keep his word given through the psalmist. This, of course, would result in one of two things: either God would be proved a liar, or Jesus would publicly prove his utter righteousness, making it impossible for him to fulfill his actual mission.

You see, Jesus had read Isaiah. And he had taken the portions of Isaiah that scholars call “the servant songs” as an explanation of his calling. Our Old Testament passage is one of them. And in it, the righteous servant of God “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”. The servant takes upon himself the sins and punishment of others. It is suffering that he does not deserve, but he takes it up willingly out of love and obedience to God the Father, and out of love and care for us his brothers.

Jesus resisted the temptation to short-circuit the Father’s will for him. He knew that his mission was to include suffering *and* righteousness. “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” The Lord Jesus will be vindicated, but not until after making himself the perfect sacrifice for the sins of others.

So here is the unblemished sacrifice, offered to God on behalf of sinners. He bears the griefs and sorrows of the penitent, just as a lamb sacrificed on the altar bears the grief and sorrow of sin. The sacrifice is not the sinner. It bears the sin and death of the sinner, so that the sinner may live. But unlike the sacrificial lamb, Our Lord actually experienced all the temptation that we do. He knew what it was to be human, yet he did not sin.

We are like sheep. We are stupid, focused on that next clump of grass, unaware of the consequences of our actions, apt to get hopelessly lost. We follow the devices and desires of our own fallen, wicked hearts. We go our own way rather than God's.

He also is like a sheep. He goes patiently and without protest to his undeserved death, a death that is taken on because someone else deserves it, namely us. The punishment that we do deserve is exacted upon him who does not deserve it. And yet, because he takes it willingly and undeservedly, we are healed by it. We could never have born the punishment. It would be never-ending, like our transgressions and iniquities. But he can bear it. It kills him, but he will be vindicated in Resurrection.

Let no one ever again question the righteousness or justice of God. Though it may be beyond our understanding, it is always perfect. We are silenced by the sheer magnitude of injustice God took upon himself in his Incarnation and on the cross. If he is willing to bear that injustice for the sake of making us just, then our own puny, mongrel notions of justice will simply have to accede to his, regardless of our capacity to comprehend it all.

Why do the righteous suffer? Because it is the pattern ordained and sanctified by Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a ransom for many, who chose to be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Those of us, then, who follow this perfectly just Lord must be willing to drink the same cup and to be baptized in our own blood. Obviously, we cannot be the perfect sacrifice for others in the way that he is. We have our own sins for which we need *him* to atone. But we are called to model ourselves after Our Lord. We are called to serve him in suffering *and* righteousness, righteous suffering.

In fact, if you do not know the agony of trying to do what is right under affliction, then there is something lacking in your submission to God. The disciple of Jesus Christ lives in this agony. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do." There is no escaping the agony of living under the righteousness regard of this just God, except to live as if he is not there. And that only removes the harrowing experience to a later, more intense appointment.

But we also “have a great high priest ... Jesus, the Son of God”. He sympathizes with us and our weaknesses. He has been through it all and taken it all upon himself. And yet he was also the perfectly just God himself. And so we can approach God with confidence in our agony. We can agonize victoriously, knowing that grace and mercy are given us “to help in time of need”, and knowing that Our Lord, by becoming a servant, has won the victory for us.