

Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

June 4-5, 2016

Readings: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Galatians 1:11-14, 15ac, 16a, 17, 19; Luke 7:11-17

Try as I may, I will never pretend to be able to comprehend what must go through the minds and hearts of parents who are struggling in the wake of a severe sickness of one of their children. Even less so could I comprehend their state of mind following the death of a child. It is every parent's nightmare. In this weekend's readings— not once but twice— we are confronted with death and its aftermath for the mother and widow left behind.

God's designs can all too easily confound and confuse, striking to the very heart. Yet in both cases, a miracle occurs and life is snatched from the claws of death.

Our first reading takes place in the coastal town of Zarephath, located between the towns of Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean Coast in present day Lebanon. It became a Christian city in the first century while the Gospel occurs at Nain, not too far from Nazareth. The sacred authors saw fit to include these geographical details, and one wonders if they did so to accentuate the authenticity of the account, providing evidence that could readily be verified by a visit to the small towns.

Details aside, this is a remarkable miracle account in that it highlights the way in which people often assumed that if tragedy struck, it could only be account of someone's sin. Ancient Jews made a causal connection between sin and tragedy in a way that we Christians do not. If something bad happened, it was because of sin.

A best selling book thirty-five years ago engaged a similar question. Rabbi Harold Kushner was struggling following the premature death

of his own son, and his reflections formed the basis for the best selling book entitled “When Bad things Happen to Good People.” In it, Kushner claimed either God was able to stop evil and chose not to do so, or He was essentially powerless to stop it. He concluded the latter. He wrote: “I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.”¹

Sadly, the book was fundamentally flawed. With all due respect to the Rabbi, the Church has a radically different answer to this difficult question and so too quite frankly, does Orthodox Judaism, from which he departs. We do not believe that God is powerless in the face of evil, or that in allowing it, He is turning a blind eye.

With infinite wisdom, God did not create a perfect world, but a world “in a state of journeying” towards its ultimate perfection. We are not there yet. This process of becoming includes the more perfect alongside the less perfect, the constructive as well as the destructive forces of nature.² St. Augustine once wrote: “For God...would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself.”³

It is certainly the case that Jesus did not heal every individual who was gravely ill, and the Scriptures speak of three restoration miracles, Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus and this miracle. While not a small number, obviously, many more died without the benefit of such a miracle from the dead. For the first time in his Gospel, Luke refers to Jesus as “Lord”, a title reserved for God alone.

¹ Harold Kushner, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” p. 134

² Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph # 310

³ Augustine of Hippo, *Enchiridion* 3,11

So obviously, the lesson is beyond the mere physical restoration. It contains a valuable spiritual lesson. There are many ways in which we long for the “life breath” to return to our souls, for we feel as if we are dying spiritually. We may not immediately recognize the danger. It may be a slow bleed, a consistent but methodical descent into the depths of spiritual pain, anger or even despair.

In times like these, the message of today’s readings gives up hope that not only is God aware of our struggles, but that he reaches out to lift us up to new life. No matter how low we may feel we have sunk, His loving hand is underneath us, ready to lift us up. Are we able to see our sufferings as paths to greater union with God?

Are we willing to trust even when our hopes have been dashed or worse yet, our lives been upended? Perhaps only in time are we able to discover that God can bring some good out of evil, while firmly maintaining that God could never Himself be the cause of a moral evil. Nor do we see a direct link between a tragedy and one’s personal sinfulness. Recall, Old Testament Book of Job wrestled with this very question.

If and when we feel that the spiritual life that animates our souls has gone dry, may we recognize that Jesus not only understands, but he stands ready to lift us up again, to buoy our spirits, to fan the flame in our hearts. He is not absent from us- the Lord does not relish our spiritual struggles, nor is He powerless to effect positive change.

Do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer.⁴ Certainly, our faith may be tested, yet God certainly desires to give us the strength to endure evil, and His grace is not lacking to those who trust.

⁴ cf. Evagrius Ponticus, *De oratione* 34:PG 79,1173. Cf. CCC # 2737