

Third Sunday in Lent

At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God.

Luke 13, 1-9

There were some contemporaries of Jesus who believed that disease, disability and premature death were God's punishment for sin. Chapter 9 of John's Gospel opens with a question to Jesus from his own disciples about a man they encountered who had been blind from birth: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?" (John 9, 2) In today's gospel reading from Luke, we meet a Jesus who is fully aware of the prevailing beliefs about sin, so he poses the questions himself: "Do you suppose that these Galileans who suffered like that were greater sinners than any other Galileans? They were not, I tell you." (Luke 13, 2)

Underlying such questions is a rather strange and twisted theology. It is as though God were someone who shows what he thinks about people by having them executed or die in a motor accident or exterminated in an earthquake or a sunami. It is akin to saying that God triggered an earthquake to wipe out several hundred thousand Haitians because of their evil lives. Such suggestions are grotesque and terribly insulting to God even to entertain them.

However, there are still people who seem to cling to such a view of God. Or it might be more accurate to say that they are caught up in a certain amount of projection, telling us how they would go about running the world if they were God. There may even be some whose religious fervour is such that they use such a distorted picture of God to frighten us into lifting our performance. Even St. Paul slips into this kind of distortion in today's second reading when he says: "We must not put the Lord to the test: some of them did, and they were killed by snakes. You must never complain: some of them did, and they were killed by the Angel of Death." (1 Corinthians 10, 9-10) While we know that religious threats rarely succeed in changing our behaviour, they can leave us with scars and funny ideas about God. So one of our reflections for this coming week might be to stop and think about the various faces and guises we attribute to God and which ones in particular influence the way in which we approach God. In contrast to Paul, the first reading from Exodus shows us a God who is interested in having us involved in social justice and action: "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings...I send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." (Exodus 3, 7-15) That face of God is reflected to us whenever someone challenges us about our social responsibilities: how we might reach out to refugees and asylum seekers; what we can do to make Indian students safe in our midst; the action we can take to ensure that children are protected and women are respected and treated with equality.

The second part of today's gospel is a message of hope. The parable of the barren fig tree that is spared is sometimes referred to by scripture scholars as the "gospel of second chances." The farm manager appeals to the landowner to give the disappointing fig tree one more year to bear fruit. Similarly, we are encouraged to live in hope that a merciful God will

give us other opportunities to pull our lives together and to extract ourselves from the messes we sometimes make or into which we sometimes slip.

I read recently the story of Romel Joseph, a talented musician who had been born into a poor Haitian family. While in primary school, he was given the opportunity by the Sister who taught him to learn the violin. He flourished and eventually won a Fulbright scholarship to study at the Julliard and train with the Boston Symphony. Instead of pursuing a career as a performing artist, he returned after graduation and established the New Victorian School to provide musical opportunities for the poorest children of Haiti. In 2000, the school was destroyed by fire. Within two weeks, he was back teaching and volunteers had set about rebuilding the school. It was destroyed again in the recent earthquake. He and his pregnant wife were the only ones in the building at the time. She and their child were killed, and Romel was trapped inside for more than eighteen hours. He tells how he survived by praying and “playing in his head” every violin concerto he had ever learned. He was eventually rescued and evacuated to the United States for emergency surgery to two broken legs and a crushed left hand - the one with which he grips the violin. From his hospital bed he said in an interview: “As long as Haiti has children, you have a purpose being there. As long as there are kids there, they have to have a reasonable level of health and they have to have an education. I need more than an earthquake to make me stop my work in Haiti.”

Romel Joseph has lifted himself out of hardship and calamity to embrace the hope of the fig tree in today’s gospel. In doing so, he reflects a particularly attractive face of God. No matter what disappointments and disasters touch our lives, God’s Spirit continues to putt in our way opportunities for new beginnings, invitations to try new approaches, nudges to move beyond our pain and hurt and to make things right. Are we spirited enough to embrace them?

As I go about my life, I wonder which face of God I reflect to others?