

Blame & Grace

It's hard to let God be God. We long to explain things only God can know, seeking cause and effect for every good and every evil in this world. Yet terrible things sometimes happen to decent people, and bad behavior sometimes goes unpunished. In the war in Artsakh and Armenia, for example, many good and decent people lost their lives, and many more their homes and livelihoods. Why did this happen? Was God not with us? Who is to blame for this? The same questions arise in trying to wrap our heads around the Coronavirus, which has taken so many innocent people around the world. Why is this happening? Where is God? Who is to blame for this?

In all tragedies, be they societal or personal, it is quite natural to ask why and to seek explanation and meaning for our loss. God knows this, and encourages us to bring before him our most difficult cases, issues of life and death, good and evil-for judgement is his alone. What God warns us against, in today's reading, is setting ourselves up to be the judge and jury-of others or ourselves- which has only ever led to disaster. Jesus illustrates this misguided tendency of ours in today's gospel reading. Two terrible tragedies had happened in Jerusalem. One group of people from Galilee were killed in a political skirmish, and another 18 souls were killed when a building suddenly collapsed on them. Jesus had heard the gossip about these tragedies and, with his deep insight into human nature, knows what people are thinking. 'These Galileans thugs must have brought this crackdown on their own heads,' and 'those people must have been up to no good if God let that building crash down on them.'

Jesus knows well the inner judge and jury that lives in each of our heads when tragedy strikes; the voice which insists on answers and fixates on something or someone to blame. It has been that way from the days of Adam and Eve, and it remains a great temptation for us today, especially in times of tragedy in Armenia and around the world. 'If Armenian leadership wasn't so corrupt and inept,' we are hearing 'we wouldn't have lost so much in Artsakh.' 'If people in this country were just more rational about masks and distancing,' many think, 'we wouldn't still be losing so many people.'

And of course there is truth mixed in our judgements, and always lessons to learn in our losses. There are post-war lessons for Armenia, Covid-19 lessons for the US, and lessons for each of us in facing up to our own personal failings. But we must never forget to first let God be God, leaving final judgement to him alone. For whatever contributing causes there are to war or pandemic or personal tragedies like illness, addiction or divorce-in the end-we must humbly concede that there is a randomness to tragedies and evil in this world. Life is fragile, and from this, no one is spared. And to the inner judge and jury that lives in each of our heads, looking down on the tragedy of others, Jesus has harsh words today; "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (Lk 13:5)

Though seemingly harsh, Jesus loves us too much to lie to us. He wants to wake us up. Let senseless deaths, any death, awaken you, says Jesus. Make sure you know to whom you belong. Stop judging others and pay attention to your own life, it is a gift from God that you will give back. How have you been a good steward of what has been given to you? Jesus finishes with the parable of the fig tree, saying that, in a very real way, our lives and all of creation are God's garden. We are like beautiful fruit trees that God has planted. And since our lives are not our own, we are in no place to question how many years this one lasts or how and why this tree or that tree was cut down. Our only question, which we answer with our very lives, is are we bearing fruit in our lives for God and for others as is our Christian calling?

So as this tumultuous year winds down, let us resist the temptation to usurp God's role of judge and jury in matters of ultimate good and evil, life and death which is not ours to know. Let us instead focus our questions back on ourselves in this penitential season of Advent. Questions like, can people even tell from my behavior and attitude, from the fruit of my life, that I am a follower of Christ? Questions like, have I been so fixated on all I take from work, society, relationships and life, that I have neglected to give to all of these as is my stewardship calling?

As you may know, the parable of the fig tree does not end with the tree being cut down. Instead the gardener, Our Lord says, "let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and cultivate it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not you can cut it down." (Lk 13:8-9) There's urgency and hope in the gardener's voice. "Give me a year--I'm not willing to give up on this tree." And our Lord is not ready to give up on any of us. Give us a year, merciful God, that we might repent and live our life how it was intended. Come to us Lord in the new year ahead, cultivate our hearts with your wisdom, your forgiveness, and your grace-now and always-amen.