

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Wisdom 1:13-15, 2:23-24

Psalm 29

2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15

Mark 5:21-43

“Death was not God’s doing, he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living.”
These are the opening lines from our first reading from the book of Wisdom today.

I don’t know how much clearer about this God could be. He is the God of the living, not the dead. He did not make death, he does not like death – God wants us to live. As St Irenaeus put it (whose feast day we celebrated this past week), the glory of God is man *fully alive*. And yet, how many of us—even faithful Christians—struggle to truly believe this. When a loved one endures suffering and dies, we can easily be tempted into thinking that such suffering and death is somehow a punishment from God. That it was God who caused it to happen.

What a distressing thought this is. Not only do we have the difficulty of watching someone close to us go through the pain of suffering and death, we often torture ourselves with the thought that their suffering, their death, was caused by something that they or we did to anger God, to incur his wrath and condemnation. Not only is this a harrowing idea, it is a thoroughly anti-Christian idea. It is an idea, if I may say so, straight from the evil one. As our first reading said, it was the devil’s envy that brought death into the world, and so it stands to reason that he would try to cover his tracks and blame God for the death he helped bring about.

So today we might ask the question: why are we so prone to going along with this idea that God would want or approve of suffering and death? We have been told time and again that God is love, that he created us in love, that he wants us to live with him in his love. So why do we have such a hard time believing that he doesn’t want suffering and death for us?

I suspect there are two reasons. Firstly, we know that God is all-powerful, and all-knowing. It’s the classic “problem of evil” – if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, given the existence of suffering and death in our world, how can he be all-loving?

Our shallow notions of power often conceive of God as some kind of cosmic puppeteer, controlling every little thing that happens from above. And it’s true that he sustains our being in every single moment, in ways we can’t begin to fully comprehend. And yet, because the all-powerful God is also all-loving, divine power also incorporates freedom, for love cannot be forced – love must be offered freely and accepted freely, or else it would not be love.

This divine interplay between power and love, between power and freedom, is so beyond our common black-and-white ways of thinking that it is not really a surprise

that we so often overemphasise one part of the equation, particularly in times of stress and pain.

A second reason for this mistaken idea is perhaps based on the observation that bad things often seem to happen to bad people, whereas good things often seem to happen to good people. So for instance, if we treat people miserably and hatefully, they tend to despise us. On the other hand, if we are generous and loving, others tend to treat us well in return. And God himself tells us that he rewards those who do what is right, and that the way of sin leads to death. However, this is a truth that can easily be twisted, resulting in a very mistaken idea – namely, that when bad things happen, it must be because someone did something wrong, and that when good things happen, it must be because God loves us more than others. Jesus explicitly stated that this is not the case – that there is no direct correlation between what happens to us and the question of whether we deserved it or not. The oldest book in the Bible, the book of Job, is all about this very question.

And so it is important that we hear the Lord loud and clear in our readings today. God insists that he does not want anyone to die. He is the God of the living. He wills that we be healed, and that we live. Of all the mistaken notions that Jesus came to correct, this is arguably the greatest – this idea that suffering and death are somehow a sign of God's anger and punishment. Christ's whole life radically and completely corrects this mistaken idea – through his ministry, through his teaching, and finally through his passion and death.

Jesus spent much of his ministry healing the sick and suffering and even resuscitating the dead, like we heard in the Gospel with Jairus' daughter. He did not heal them based on their holiness, or because they deserved it. He healed them simply because they asked, or because they had faith that he could, or just because. He showed that God loves us and wants us to live, not because of what we do, but because of who we are: his beloved sons and daughters in Christ, made in his image and likeness.

In his teaching, Jesus turned on its head the worldly presumptions about whom God has blessed, most clearly in the Beatitudes. Who are the blessed ones, he asked? Those who are happy? No, those who mourn. Those who are free of pain? No, those who suffer. Those who are approved of by all? No, those who are persecuted. He taught his followers very clearly that suffering and death do not mean that someone is distant from God. That, actually, it is when we take up our cross and follow him that we are most closely united to him and embraced in his love.

Of course, knowing that we would still not really comprehend all this, Jesus's ultimate lesson came not via what he said but by what he did. Jesus gave the ultimate demonstration of the fact that God does not want to harm us or see us suffer by submitting to suffering and death himself. The sinless Word of God, perfect in holiness, who had never offended the Father and who walked perfectly in his ways, suffered and died the worst of deaths imaginable. And in his crucifixion Jesus showed us that suffering and death cannot possibly be the a of God's anger or wrath or

distance from us. God cannot be distant from himself – he was not distant from the cross, and he is not distant from the suffering and death of any of us.

As followers of Christ, our understanding of the mystery of death must not be that of the world around us. Through the mystery of our Lord's passion, death is no longer to be feared, because, rather than being seen as a punishment, it has become a means of sharing in God's very life, in the life of the one who suffered and died for us.

Jesus's passion and death show us that, even though God has permitted death to enter into his creation through the devil's cunning and our misuse of our freedom, those who suffer or die are never distant from God or his love. The Lord shows us that he is closest to such as these, and that the greatest saints are those who were intimately united with him through their own embrace of the cross.

This begs the question: what is death, what is suffering, if it is not punishment, if it is not a sign of God's distance from us?

Our tradition teaches us that it is first and foremost a mystery, a reality of life in this fallen world that God allows for reasons that we cannot fully understand in this life. And yet a mystery, in the Catholic understanding, is not something simply unknowable, but rather something that can be known in an inexhaustible number of levels. And Jesus has revealed that in entering into suffering and death with him, these foes are transformed into new life – they no longer to be considered a sign of God's wrath or anger or condemnation.

As St Paul proclaimed: death, where is your sting? Christ entered into the mystery of death and suffering so that they could be transformed into an opportunity for us to encounter God and his great love for us, and to respond to his love in faith and trust.

Jesus told his followers then and he tells us now to not be afraid – to not be afraid of suffering, and to not be afraid of death. Our Lord went through the crucible of death—that most unconquerable of foes—so as to definitively break its power, and, most amazingly, to transform it into the means of gaining eternal life. The Good News is that death no longer has the final say. Our Lord desires for us life to the full, both now in this life, and in the life to come. That this fullness of life requires us to embrace the cross may look like folly to those without faith, but we have been shown that Christ turned the cross into the ultimate victory, and so we need not be afraid. Our Lord is risen, and, through the cross, he invites us to join him in life eternal.