

The gospel passage we just heard points to some of the most common yet complicated questions any Christian could ever ask. They are the sort of questions that anyone who has ever experienced serious suffering or deep loss might be expected to ask.

Questions like: “Where is God in this?” or “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” or “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or, and this could be the most pointed question of all, “Does God cause suffering, and is suffering a form of Divine punishment for bad behaviour?”

I am certain that all of us have struggled to answer some or all those questions at some point in our lives.

In today’s gospel lesson we read that Jesus has been informed of two horrific events. In one instance, Pontius Pilate, a mass murderer, has ordered his soldiers to brutally slaughter a number of innocent Galilean Jews, using their bodies as a burnt offering religious sacrifice to the Emperor, who was considered a kind of demigod in those days.

Currently we are witnessing a similar ghastly scenario play out daily in Ukraine, where another mass murderer, Vladimir Putin, has ordered his soldiers to massacre thousands of innocent Ukrainians as a pseudo religious sacrifice to his own vanity and paranoia.

While Jesus hears of Pilate’s treachery, news arrives that in Jerusalem a tower has fallen, killing eighteen innocent souls. The people who relayed this horrible news to Jesus then posed the same soul-searing question that has perplexed any person of conscience ever since: “Why did this tragedy happen to these people?”

But then the people who relayed this bad news to Jesus took their questioning one step further. They asked, were the victims of these two tragedies being punished because they were worse, more sinful, than most other people? In response, Jesus was as clear as clear can be. He said “No.” Those who died were no better and no worse than anyone else.

I believe this is Jesus’ point: God does not cause us to suffer because of our sin, but sin can cause us to suffer. There is no question that Pilate’s murderous deeds—as well as the horrific actions perpetrated by today’s tyrants—are sinful. And sin has consequences. Destructive behaviors, violence, the lust for power, and the quest for vengeance and retribution lead to much suffering in the world. That was true two thousand years ago when Jesus lived. It remains true in our time.

It is the simplest of messages that we were taught as children, and that we in turn try to instill in children, yet we need continually to be reminded of throughout our lives. The simple message that our actions have consequences, both good and ill.

Jesus then tells a story, a parable, about a fig tree that did not bear fruit. The owner of the fig tree wanted to cut it down, destroy it, because for three years in succession it had failed to produce any figs and was therefore a waste of the scarce soil in which it was planted. The fig tree had failed to live up to its potential, and therefore must go. That seemed only fair. But the man’s gardener suggested another possibility: “Sir,” he said, “let the fig tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” We are not told if that extra year of care and nurture of the fig tree made any difference

I think Jesus intended for this parable to remind us, yet again, that God does not operate according to our normal human standards and expectations and practices. Rather, God’s wisdom is marked by God’s patience with us, God’s faithful tending of us, and God’s hopeful expectations for us. I think the parable is a vital and much needed present-day reminder that even when, or especially when, the world appears to be at its most broken and sinful, God is still tending the garden. When our world is dark and dysfunctional, Jesus wants us to know that God is still working in and through God’s people to bring light and life, love and peace to our world.

And here is the best part: God sometimes brings truth and understanding into our lives in the most unexpected ways.

Like the farmer who was on his deathbed despairing over the fate of his lazy sons. What would become of them, the farmer wondered, after he was no longer around to provide for them by doing all the work that they were too lazy to do for themselves. As the farmer's final hour approached, he arrived at a moment of inspiration, and he crafted a lie.

He called his sons to gather around his beside and told them, "I am soon to leave this world. I want you to know that I have left a treasure of gold for you. It is hidden in my wheat field. Dig carefully and well and you shall find it. I ask only that you share the wealth among yourselves evenly."

The sons begged their father to tell them where exactly he had buried the treasure, but the old man took his last breath without speaking another word.

As soon as their father was buried, the sons took up their pitchforks and shovels and began turning over the soil in their father's field. They dug and dug until they had turned over the whole field twice, but they found no treasure. However, they decided that since the field now was so well dug up, they might as well plant some wheat as the lazy boys had always sat back and watched their father do for them in year's past.

The crop flourished and they reaped a bountiful harvest that first year. The following year they decided to dig up the field again in hopes of finding the buried treasure. Again, they failed to find any treasure, but since all their digging had again prepared the field for sowing, they planted it with seed. The crop that year turned out even better than the previous year.

This pattern repeated itself for several more years, until the sons had grown accustomed to the cycles of planting, growing, and harvesting, and reaping the rewards of daily labor that earned them enough money to live prosperous, happy lives. It was then, years later, that the sons came to realize the true nature of the 'treasure' their father had left for them. They had not found the gold which they were seeking, for no gold had been hidden in the field, but they had reaped their rewards.

Do you believe that we ultimately are accountable to God for what we do with our one irreplaceable life? I do. Not because I think God will punish us if we fail to meet some standard. Not at all. You might disagree, but a God who would punish God's own beloved creation is, to my way of thinking, not logical.

Just as the gardener patiently and hopefully tended to the fig tree beyond the point where others were prepared to give up on it, so God continues patiently and hopefully to tend to us. God will continue to be with us and will forgive and renew us. For our part, we are in this life to be responsible, productive, and compassionate in God's service, and entirely grateful to God for whatever faithfulness in God we possess. Our faith in God is a gift from the Creator who keeps us planted and watered, still hopeful, still believing in God's goodness and willingness to bless us through all kinds of failures and disappointments.

I will finish with these words by the Christian writer Anthony de Mello who tells us "Everything that seems on the surface to be an evil may be a good in disguise. And everything that seems good on the surface may really be an evil. We are wise when we leave it to God to decide what is good luck and what is bad, and thank God that all things turn out for good with those who love him. Then we will share something of that marvelous mystical vision of Julian of Norwich who uttered what is the loveliest and most consoling sentence I have ever read: 'And all shall be well; and all shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well'." **Amen.**