

Jesus doesn't wait for the question; he doesn't need to. Whether we dare to speak it aloud or not, at some deep level it is in the air every time tragedy strikes. In this case the news seems to be ripped from the day's headlines, the details long since lost to us. They ask Jesus if he's heard about those poor Galileans who died and then Pilate desecrated their bodies. Jesus anticipates their question and speaks it out loud: *Do you think they did something to deserve that? Did they have it coming? Were they worse sinners than the rest of us? Or, those eighteen people who died over in Siloam. Do you think that God had a reason for making that tower fall when it did?*

There are lots of things that have changed from first-century Palestine to today, too many to number. But technological changes don't fundamentally alter the human condition, and the basic human questions remain virtually unchanged. We are meaning-seeking creatures, and when the precariousness of life is exposed, we search for answers.

The people who died—way more than eighteen—when those two towers came down in lower Manhattan: was that because, as some said at the time, America had lost its way by removing prayer from schools? Those people who died from Hurricane Katrina: what was God telling us? Was it, as some said, because of sexual immorality in New Orleans? That earthquake in Haiti—was it really because of voodoo? The list goes on and on and takes various forms, but it's all one question: why do bad things happen in the world, and should they be interpreted as signs of God's wrath? It is not only the religious fundamentalists who do this, although they do sometimes seem particularly adept at finding scapegoats. I think there is some part of all of us that wonders. Maybe we'd sleep better at night if we knew why, and perhaps what scares us most is that if there isn't a reason—even one we don't fully understand—then it feels like the world is just too precarious, too tenuous. We begin to fear that it could in fact have been us, or our child, in that building or on that plane.

It is vital that we, who gather on this day in the name of Jesus, that we who claim that the Holy Scriptures are a "Word of the Lord"—that we get absolutely clear that Jesus answers these questions. No. No, no, no—a thousand times no. The world isn't made like that. There isn't a *quid pro quo* to be discovered between tragic events in a precarious world and the morality of those who die in them. It is important that we hear that and let go of our need to assign blame. When tragedy strikes, we are called to grieve; and then to do what we can to help the survivors. That is what Christians do. That is who we are.

But that isn't all that Jesus says. While dismissing that first question, he proposes another one to ponder. No, you cannot and must not, blame the victims when tragedy strikes. But what you can do is to ask yourself if *you* are living the life God means for you to be living. Every tragedy can be taken as a wake-up call to get busy living. Every tragedy can be a wake-up call that invites us to ask not about others but ourselves: am I doing the work God has given me to do? If it were me who died, am I prepared to meet my Maker without regrets?

The Psalmist says that "the span of our life is seventy years, perhaps in strength even eighty." I was looking at the obituaries the other day and wondered if we might revise that just a bit after noticing how many people were dying in their nineties. But the point remains the same and a decade or two in either direction doesn't change the Psalmist's point: "*They pass quickly and we are gone.*" (Psalm 90:10) Blind Willie McTell's mother taught him the same wisdom when she sang to him as a child:

*Just as well get ready, you got to die.
You just as well be ready, you got to die.
See it may be tomorrow, you can't tell the minute or the hour,
You just as well get ready, you got to die.*

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The fragility of life and the ever-present reminders of tragic death remind us that we are meant for living. But one part of life is in preparing for our dying. We can't call a "do-over."

Today's service began with the Exhortation, which we use once a year during the Lenten Season. If someone asked me to revise the Exhortation today for a new edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* I'd jump at the chance; these are not my favorite pages in a *Prayerbook* that I love. It's not so much that there is anything untrue in the words spoken today. The Exhortation reminds us that Jesus instituted the Last Supper on the night before he suffered and died on the cross, and that he chose to do this out of love and that we should remember the dignity of the Sacrament when we share in this meal and above all that our piety and our ethics need to be in synch. And all of that is certainly true. There is nothing more obscene than a person coming to the Table to receive the Body and Blood of Christ and then going into coffee hour or the parking lot to gossip and speak ill of those same members of that very same Body. The Exhortation exhorts us to examine our lives and live our lives in congruence with what the Sacrament is about, and if we are members of Christ's Body then we should act like it. And if we are not yet there, then we need to amend our lives. So far, so good.

The Exhortation can be heard to say, however, and maybe even means to say, that we better get our act together *before* we eat. But this meal that is at the center of our life together is also medicine for our souls. If I am having a hard time forgiving someone (including myself, by the way) then the Exhortation makes it sound like I am not to come to the Table until I forgive. It seems to me, however, as both a pastor and a fellow traveler, that sometimes we most desperately need to be fed—*nourished*—in order to gain the strength to do what we cannot do on our own. There can be a vicious cycle that is perpetuated if we start to think we need to be good enough to come to that Table and when we recognize that we are not, we (quite literally) ex-communicate ourselves. But I believe that is when we most desperately need to come, as broken sinners who need to "taste and see" that the Lord is good. We are not worthy; and yet still Christ says, "come, my beloved, the Table is set, all is prepared..."

Now the problem with my un-Exhortation is that we can get in a habit of coming to the Table out of habit. Or like Eucharistic Prayer C puts it, we can get in the habit of coming for solace only and not for strength, for pardon only and not for renewal. The Holy Eucharist, I think, is both medicine for our souls *and* a wake-up call: it is amazing grace *and* a call to live lives worthy of being called Christians. Each week as we break the bread and share the cup, Christ holds out a vision for us of the Reign of God, of what God intends for this world and for our own lives, and if we are paying attention than none of us can leave the Table without recognizing that there are plenty of ways we fall short that can be worked on.

My own exhortation would be rooted in the words attributed to St. Augustine: *behold what you are; may we become what we receive.* May we see that we are One Body with One Lord and One Faith—not just here but across the world and including denominations we may not feel much

affinity with, called to share in the work that God has given us to do not on Sunday mornings but all week long. We are called to walk the talk.

A friend of mine, an Episcopal priest in this diocese, told this story recently at Clergy Day: his wife is a school teacher in one of the toughest cities in this Commonwealth. She teaches where she teaches because she feels called to be there. But it's not easy work and the kids aren't interested in learning and most of the time they are pretty rude: they don't do their homework and their parents don't seem to care. So every day is a battle. And then she got this student who was different. She got this student who was eager to learn and who was polite. One day the teacher asked her: how come you are so different? And the girl said, "I'm a Jehovah's Witness; I would never act like that, or be rude to a teacher; it's against my religion."

Now here is the question my friend posed: *do we Episcopalians ever find ourselves in circumstances where we say that?* I am different, because I'm an Episcopalian. At school or at work, at lunch in the cafeteria or in the corporate boardroom, on the train or bus do we say: "I just wouldn't ever do that...I'm an Episcopalian and I am a part of the Body of Christ and I was fed on Sunday morning (or Saturday night) with the Body and Blood of Christ and I'm trying to become what I received, with God's help.

Lent calls us back to that vision. That is what repentance is all about: a call to be who we are meant to be as followers of Jesus Christ. And that brings us full circle. No, those Galileans and those people over in Siloam didn't die because they deserved it. But their deaths can be and should be a wake-up call to all of us. So consider the fig tree. If a fig tree doesn't make figs, then it's not a fig tree, at least not a very good one. And if a Christian isn't doing justice and loving mercy, then she's not a Christian, at least not a very good one. *We are meant to bear fruit.*

In the face of tragedy it is natural for us to want to know *why* it happened. But in the end, Jesus says that there is a much better question to ask: how will that tragedy wake you up and lead you to repent and ultimately transform your life? Knowing that the span of life is at best seventy or eighty or ninety years, and the years pass by very quickly: what is it you are meant to do with your one wild and precious life? Do that—one day at a time.