



Listen to the Beloved

Mark 9:2-9 NIV

"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

February 15, 2015

Thought For The Week

Scriptures: Job 7: 1-2, 6-7 • 1 Corinthians 9: 16-19, 22-23 • Mark 1: 29-39

The new year is still in its infancy and I suspect most of us have enthusiastic hopes that the coming days will provide some evidence that things can always get better, at least better than last year. So, I hope that I will not disappoint you when I try to search the scriptures and glean a word or two that will help us deal with the world as it is.

Let's hope that we can look at the world the way it is to admit that there is a whole lot of suffering present in the lives of many. We all read the news and are saddened over events that dismay us: civil war, airline crashes, the Ebola crisis, and poor governing in many countries. Of course, this is also a personal experience for many people; nevertheless, all of us must occasionally ask ourselves: why must there be suffering? Does God cause it, is it simply a part of the broken social world where we live, or are we ourselves also partly to blame?

So what, actually, is the answer (if there is one) to a phenomenon that most people on this planet experience at least occasionally. The scriptures of Job, Paul and Mark give us some insight.

First let me also steer you to some answers offered by several writers of our own time who tried to deal with suffering by simply giving it serious thought.

The first comes from Albert Camus, the French novelist and philosopher who wrote this: "The role of the Christian," he said "is to get away from abstractions and confront the blood-stained face that history has taken on today. The role of the Christian is to speak out clearly and pay up personally."

The point Camus is making is that we have no right to accept suffering lying down. A lot of suffering is brought on by people, human beings possessing intelligence. This sort of suffering obviously could be stopped, but often it goes on and on with no one standing up to confront it.

The author of the Book of Job suffered unimaginably and yet he was unwilling to admit that suffering is something to be placidly endured. "The good and the innocent," he says, suffer not as a punishment for sin; they have done nothing to deserve the ills that befall them." We have the sense from Job, therefore, that if suffering happens, we should make some effort to soften it in whatever way we can.

Another modern prophet who explored the mystery of suffering was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and victim of Nazi torture in 1945. From his prison cell in Flossenbergl he wrote: "What bothers me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is or, indeed, who Christ is for us today?" Bonhoeffer struggled to understand how Christ's suffering and death, can help someone understand the Nazi holocaust and all the other forms of torture that exist in every age? More to the point, he asked: "What does it mean for Christ to be Lord in a "religionless" world, a world come of age?" What agonized Bonhoeffer was the question, "Who, indeed, is Christ for us today?"

Finally the Gospel of Mark also offers some insights. The Christ of Mark's gospel found himself continually facing suffering, personal and global. He reflected, for instance, on the immense suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Romans under the emperor Titus. Nonetheless, Mark describes Jesus as one who spent his adult life preaching good news, healing and bringing hope to all who would listen. For Jesus this was his way of confronting public evil and suffering.

Finally, we have the model of Paul the apostle. Paul, obviously, was not a soft, retiring person; he struggled to bring the words of Christ all across the Middle East. Surely, then, he must have asked himself Bonhoeffer's question: "Who is Christ for me today?"

So, summing it all up we need to say that suffering may be a constant presence in this world but the response to it is not to say: "So what?" The answer lies in the question: "Who is Christ for us today?"

Prayer Thought for the Week

New encounters with God bring fresh awareness of God's call to move into new ways of living. Leaving is never easy, but especially difficult when we are comfortable where we are. God, help us risk new ventures.

The people of New Caledonia work and play, eat and sleep, dream of peace as they long for a hope-filled future. Watch over them, we ask.

Please use this space to pray for any current concern or event in our community, city, state, nation or world that you feel needs to be held up to God for prayerful consideration.

God, sometimes our human problems seem to create impossible barriers. Our souls wilt, our spirits droop. Help us support and encourage one another. May the word of encouragement and the sustaining prayer be our gifts to you today. Amen.

Stewardship Thought for the Week

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. 1Corinthians 11: 1, Leprosy was a one-way ticket to exile in biblical times. Those afflicted were banished from the rest of the community and had to live in isolation. Any illness was thought to be the result of sinfulness, either the sins of the afflicted or of their parents or ancestors. People with mental illnesses were believed to be possessed by evil spirits, and they too were shunned and driven out of towns and villages to fend for themselves. These attitudes were common throughout the ancient world. The open sores of skin diseases and the strange behavior of the mentally ill were a stigma all could recognize.

Not much has changed. Many of us today fear people with diseases such as AIDS and we are uncomfortable or embarrassed around someone who has a mental illness. Those who have such afflictions often suffer more from people's negative attitudes than from the condition itself. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians Paul exhorts the people to, ***"avoid giving offense, just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."*** Paul is encouraging us as well, as we listen and read these same age-old words, to give glory to God and be sensitive to others. ***"Avoid giving offense"*** is the policy he advocates and ends with the admonition: ***"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."*** Paul gives us a living witness of his own adaptation of himself to meet the needs of others, whatever those needs may be, by following the example of Christ. Paul knew Christ's life, his message and his deeds brought people back to full life.

Do we? It's not too late! Seek to give life not offense!