

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Kings 17:8-16; Matthew 6:24-34

In this world we constantly see and bear and experience the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. Every death is the tragic fall in the Garden of Eden relived and replayed. And so death ought to be a reminder to us, a reason to ask ourselves if we are ready to meet it, especially unexpectedly. Think of some of the car accidents we've seen as a community in the last few years. What a stark reminder that we live in a fallen world. What a sad thing to bury a young person in the prime of life. And what a reason to consider our own mortality, to remember that our day might come when we least expect it.

We also suffer the consequences of our neighbor's sins. When a husband or wife breaks the marriage covenant, not only he or she suffers the effects, but the other spouse, the innocent party, so to speak, the children, the extended family, and the community. When a child doesn't honor his or her father or mother everyone suffers, as a lack of respect for one's parents usually walks hand in hand with a lack of respect for all authority and for other people. When someone commits a crime against someone else, the victim bears the effects of something he or she did nothing to instigate. And isn't that we are so troubled and saddened by many of the things we see in the news, as the strong exploit the weak, the rich the poor, or the cunning the trusting? We live in Genesis 3, and not in Genesis 1-2, and what a depressing thing that can be.

But we also suffer the consequences of our own sins, don't we? In our daily lives we confirm God's judgment upon Adam's sin, transmitted to us through original sin. We are skilled at breaking our own hearts, aren't we? We are capable of hurting ourselves like no one else, as the devil tempts us just as he did Eve, leading us to question what God really has said, if the consequences of sin are quite so unavoidable as the Bible makes them sound. And the only way to start digging out of the sin-shoveled holes we dig for ourselves is not to point fingers, but to own up to what we've said and done, and start climbing. The question to ask at such times isn't how could God let this happen to me, but where do I go from here. And the answer is always the same. ***"Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you"*** (Zechariah 1:3). God is good, so good that He can bring good even from our own evil, disciplining us as sons for our benefit, both now and in eternity.

Let me make this clear, though, in case I didn't already: I am not saying that each and every sickness, setback, hardship, or trial that God allows to come into our life is the direct result, or even an indirect result, of some sin we've committed. But I am saying this: When God allows such things to come into our lives, they provide a clear and unique opportunity for self-examination and introspection. Have I lived in a way so as to bring this on myself, or could God be allowing this to happen to teach me something I've not yet taken to heart, or as I am reminded of the fleeting and transitory nature of earthly things and life, how might I with God's help use this test to correct the crooked in my life and rekindle my faithfulness? As St. Paul said in our second lesson, ***"Let each one test his own work."***

For one of my classes at CMU I had to read the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Venerable Bede. In it there was a passage about a man in the king's court, a nominally Christian man, who had put off repentance his whole life, assuring the devout king who sincerely feared for his salvation that he would take care of it later, assuming, of course, as so many of us do, that he would have a later. Finally, he fell ill and had a dream that two handsome men came and gave him a beautiful little book to read. In it, he found his good works, but they were "few and trifling." Then a horde or gruesome looking demons with ugly faces approached and handed him a terrible looking very big book. In it he found all his sins. They were many. The demons then asked the handsome young men, angels, we would assume, "Why are you sitting here? You know very well that this man belongs to us." The handsome young men confessed that the demons were right and left. Not long

after that, having told the story to his very devout king, who came to see him, he died in despair (291-292). Bede then noted that the sixth century bishop of Rome, Gregory, had once pointed out that such events take place and are recorded for the benefit of others. Jesus warns us all in our Holy Gospel, ***“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”*** We should seize every opportunity, then, to ask ourselves this question: Whom have I been serving, God or the devil, God or the world, God or myself? And then after that: Am I banking on a later that might never come.

In our first lesson, Elijah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, the great preacher of repentance, was sent to the most sinful king in the history of Israel, the most idolatrous, blasphemous, debauched, and immoral leader of God’s chosen people. At the end of 1 Kings 16, the chapter before our first lesson, we are told that ***“Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him;”*** and that, ***“Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.”*** And so what was Elijah sent to tell Ahab? Chapter 17 begins, ***“Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”*** The Lord didn’t want this just to be a drought for Ahab. He wanted this drought, and the terrible famine that would ensue, to become a time of introspection and self-examination for Ahab, and indeed, for all of Israel. The Lord wanted that, when Elijah returned, well-fed through the gracious and miraculous hand of God at the house of the widow of Zarephath, Ahab would repent, and with him, many in Israel. Unfortunately, Ahab went the other way with it, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t recorded for our benefit, that we can’t learn from it.

God is good, and God has been good to us. He has given us our daily bread and so much more. We have not only fed but feasted. In terms of human history, he has provided for us in wondrous and amazing ways. Nowhere and in no other place in history has the land yielded and citizens enjoyed such abundance as we have. Think about that next time you walk through Meijer. But what if God took some of that away? What if we went from living like present-day Americans to those unfortunate people of the third-world? How would we respond? Would we simply complain and pout? Would we simply see a drought or famine? Or would we seize the opportunity for introspection and self-examination, for repentance? And what about when other crosses and hardships have come into our life? Have we responded in that way?

No matter how great a famine might ever strike, the Bread of Life will still abound for His faithful. There will be grace and mercy. No matter the wilderness, the waters of life will still make children of God. The bitter waters of our personal experience will still, touched by the wood of the cross, grow sweet in the light of the resurrection. When suffering enters your life, then, do as St. Paul urges in Philippians, and ***rejoice***. The Lord disciplines those He loves. Perhaps He will teach you something. If nothing more, surely He will teach you about yourself, about the temporary nature of temporal things, and about the nature of Christian trust and faith, which at its best is a life or death hold on Christ, our anchor in the storms of life. But there is often more to be learned in such times. We learn how to live for God in a more consistent way as He allows us sometimes to lose our hold on the things that have loosened our grasp on Him, to lose sight of those things that have distracted our focus on Him.

And if God has given us the greatest gift, His Son, for our greatest need, forgiveness, how can we not trust him to provide His lesser gifts for our lesser needs as well, even in drought or famine? Jesus words ring true, ***“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing.”*** And life is surely more than and the body more than clothing. Life is Christ and the body destined for the imperishable. Amen.

