

Sunday, March 22, 2020

A MAN BORN BLIND: WHY? JOHN 9 THEODICY

One of the greatest mysteries in all of the world's religions is the query concerning the awful things that take place on earth and why a benevolent Lord would allow them. A classmate of mine in divinity school started his studies as a very faithful, conservative Christian. He was a leader in "Youth for Christ" and possessed a faith that was unshakeable. My friend even received a PhD. in Biblical studies and became an author of bestselling non-fiction texts on the Bible. In one of his later texts, he writes about how his faith crumbled and that "agnosticism" now permeates his thinking. My colleague could not get past things like the holocaust. Rabbi Kushner wrote a best seller about why bad things happen to good people. One could also reflect prophets like Habakkuk who goes the other way inquiring "why do the wicked prosper?" To paraphrase a common mystery: "why do good things happen to wicked people."

The crux of the question is a classic conundrum: "Is the Lord and Creator of the universe benevolent and if She is all powerful why doesn't She do something?" The ultimate theological synopsis is written about in most books that talk about God: "Either the Lord is NOT all powerful or the Lord is not GOOD!" The free-will of humankind provides us with a partial solution. If humans are free to choose good or evil, they often make poor choices and because we live in community, those choices impact others. In truth this explains a great deal and none of us would like to live in a world where free-will is replaced with automatons or robotic responses. Yet, there are many tragic and painful events that have nothing to do with our power to choose. Earthquakes, plagues, "Tsunamis" and tornados fall into this category. Some theologians would argue that even these cataclysms are somehow connected to human decision making or the byproduct of "original sin."

An Eastern religious mind set is not as troubled about innocent suffering or “bad things” happening because there is only “Isness.” There is a vast world of people and events and we do not discern good from evil, there is only that which is. This strain of thinking creeps into the “garden of Eden.” The characters Adam and Eve were not aware of the difference between good and evil. Everything was perfect and there was a communion between the Lord and humans. They walked “hand in hand” with God in the “cool of the evening.” The narrative proceeds with an evil force embodied in a snake that “tempts Eve” into eating a fruit that would allow humans to know the difference between bad and good. They are summarily evicted from paradise and forced to live in the world more like ours today.

For me, much comfort comes from the story of Jesus the Christ and His trip through Jerusalem over two thousand years ago. The followers of Christ see a blind beggar on the road and ask Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?” Apparently, an understanding of the world order for Israelites of the time was that tragedy and suffering were a direct result of our sinfulness. Jesus brightens up our entire universe when he says: “he was born blind so that God’s power might be displayed in curing him.” Other translations read: “that God might be glorified.” What Jesus and later St. Paul are saying is that when awful things happen, it is our opportunity to partner with the Lord in making it right. In essence, Jesus is saying that we will NEVER know why the sovereign Lord has created the tragedy, but it is an opportunity to let His light shine through us. We become partners with the creator of the universe to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

This is very similar to a story the Buddha told about a warrior who is stricken by an arrow as his town is being besieged. The warrior poses the question: “who shot this arrow and what caste did he belong to? Was it a nobleman? Was it a member of the warrior caste? Was it someone from the untouchable lowest caste?” The Buddha would respond that the unnamed warrior is asking

the wrong question! The helpful question would be: “how can I remove the arrow and begin the healing process?” In a Christian mindset, we agree on this point. We don’t speculate on the etiology of a tragic event; we roll up our sleeves and go to work. This type of mindset has brought the western world to build hospitals, orphanages and universities! There are just some questions that defy a quest for THE answer. Instead, we partner with the Creator to provide answers that help the human race.

The beginning of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians writes: “The Lord comforts us in all our troubles that we might be able to comfort others suffering in the same way.” From these words, Henri Nouwen would write a book and create a system referred to as “wounded healers.” When we survive an awful life experience and have been comforted by our faith and the love of others, we “pay it forward,” and come to the aid of fellow sufferers. Like Jesus, Paul does not try to explain why tragedies happen. We live in a world of mysteries which defy perfect answers. In the teachings of the Christ and His disciple Paul, the “mysterium tremendum” of human existence continues to perplex us. Yet we are given a practical idea for healing response.

Today, we are living in the midst of a pandemic. There are many theories involving conspiracies and reasons to explain the why of Corona Virus. Schools continue to serve food. We see acts of kindness and compassion everywhere. The best of humanity is being lived out by millions of caring souls throughout the globe. We take comfort in this. We do our part and know that: “God is our shelter and refuge, a timely help in our times of trouble.” The benevolence of our Lord and His servants on earth will get us through this.

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