

The Two Sided Coin

Somebody asked why it is that so often the very best things in life are accompanied by the very worst things in life.

It's a profound question and one that doesn't have a ready, or an easy, answer.

I have shared with some of you on more than one occasion that if I have anything to offer to you as a priest; any insight, any consolation, it all grows out of the bitter soil unceremoniously dumped at my feet with the too soon death of my wife, over 30 years ago.

We had been married for only a few years.

We were both many years away from having white hair.

We had children to raise and a new life was just unfolding.

Into that joy and happiness came the bitterness and pain of cancer, and death, soiling our life.

The frequent demands for an answer, the pleas of "why?", the angry vitriol hurled at God for the unfairness, the injustice of it all; all of that, with time, became the fertile soil out of which many blessings still arise to this day.

So why is life's best so often accompanied by life's worst?

The three readings today offer us perhaps a glimpse of an answer, even if that glimpse may not fully satisfy.

We begin with the gospel lesson.

Jesus assures us that our relationship with him is irreversibly and eternally rooted in love.

That our love for each other is a reflection of our love for God — and God's love for us.

That's the beginning point.

But it's certainly not the end, at least not while we walk this earth.

And no one knows this better than St Paul.

Paul is in Athens this morning.

Think downtown Manhattan or L.A.

Paul is in the heart of the ancient world's sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, surrounded by sophisticated, cosmopolitan people — who know how the world works.

And frankly, Paul could be giving the same talk he's giving to the ancient Athenians to a crowd standing around in downtown Honolulu today, to us sophisticated, cosmopolitan people — who know how the world works.

Except rather than talking about idols made out of silver or gold, he might say to us that we are misguided, and badly mistaken, in worshipping the mysteries of Madison Avenue, and the wealth of Wall Street, and the mythical might of military power.

Aren't those, after all, the dominant "gods" of 21st century life?

Paul would remind us that we are the creators of those so-called gods, no different from the ancient Athenians who created their gods out of silver and gold.

And Paul might remind us that as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, we defile ourselves whenever we bow down to anything that we have created.

Because we are not slaves to Madison Avenue or Wall Street or the military.

To the contrary, the good thing about humans creating such things is that we can change them too.

We can defang, disempower, and neuter these supposed "unchangeable" forces that cause so much human misery.

So to worship them, to act like they are eternally constant and therefore, nothing can be done to change them, is the height of blasphemy.

Instead, as Paul points out to the ancient Athenians, we are the fruit of a gracious God who has freely gifted us with the image and likeness of the living God.

This God who is closer to us than our breath.

Who is nearer to us than our own heartbeat.

Paul reminds us of that famous picture hanging in so many bedrooms and living rooms.

That picture of Jesus knocking on the outside of a door, which if you look at it closely, you'll see that there's no door handle on the side where Jesus is standing.

The door handle is on the inside of the door, where we stand.

Symbolizing the fact that we need to open the door to God, who waits patiently beneath the roof of our porch.

Paul has these wonderful insights, and the joy these insights create in his life, all while carrying within himself what he calls "a thorn" in his side.

We don't know what that thorn is.

We don't know if it's a temptation, a defect of character, a physical ailment, or something else.

What we do know is that Paul repeatedly asks to have this thorn removed by God, and the response he repeatedly receives from God is:

"No, my grace is enough for you."

In Paul's life, reveling in the good news of Christ, while at the same time struggling with this unknown thorn, is simply another example of the very best in life being accompanied by the very worst.

Perhaps it must be so.

After all, our salvation is accomplished on the bloody wood of the cross.

And this is where St Peter's letter comes in this morning.

For in his letter, he's constantly referring to suffering.

Peter, I'm sure, suffered throughout his entire life with the regret that he had denied our Lord three times.

Peter indeed suffered physical abuse, imprisonment, and finally crucifixion, as he brought the good news to the gentile world.

So Peter knows something about suffering – just as he knows something about indescribable joy.

Encountering the risen Lord, being dispatched to bring this good news to the whole world, being promised that he will never be alone, and yet enduring beatings and jailing as part and parcel of his call.

As the very best in life accompanies the very worst.

In short, our life in Christ is far from a pain-free life.

Faith doesn't translate into everything being hunky-dory.

Indeed, sometimes it's just the opposite, as a life of faith can and often does bring trials, fears, hurt and loss.

The joys of this life are inextricably linked with life's uncertainties and anxieties.

The best and the worst, it turns out, are two sides of the same coin.

Thomas Merton, the profoundly insightful Trappist monk, reflects on this theme when he says:

“Paradoxically, I have found peace because I have always been dissatisfied.

My moments of depression and despair turn out to be renewals, new beginnings. . .

All life tends to grow like this, in mystery infused with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy . .

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So then, this dissatisfaction which sometimes used to worry me, and has certainly, I know, worried others, has helped me in fact to move freely and even gaily with the stream of life.” A Thomas Merton Reader, at 16, modified.

Similarly, Sister Joan Chittister observes:

“There are some things in life, whatever its burdens, however it is spent, which if we cultivate them will never die.

When all the stages of life have passed us by, these things alone remain: the spiritual treasure that stretches our souls to see what our eyes cannot.

The remembrance of how beautiful life really is under all its ugliness.

And the love of those around us who make the journey gentle as we go.

If the question is, ‘What is really important in life?’ — the answer is, only life itself, living it well, immersing in its beauty, love, and reflection.” Id., Essential Writings, modified.

And so, if you feel like you're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, if a loved one is suffering from a terminal illness, if your career seems to be coming apart at the seams, whatever the struggle that you may find yourself in, know this about God.

God doesn't rescue us from life's travesties and tragedies.

But God is with us no matter the difficulty.

Ours is a God who doesn't swoop down and rescue us from our crosses.

Rather, he hangs right next to us.

Yet none of this is for naught.

All difficulty, all joy, shapes us, so that we may be shaped into the image of God.

This God in whom we live and move and have our being.

+amen.