

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

At this stage of the pandemic people have accepted some changes as blessings. Meeting online has saved travel expenses. Fewer public entertainments have created more time at home. Livestreaming Mass has introduced more people to the cathedral. Any transition may conceal some blessing.

Now, plenty are sick, many have died, unemployment is high. In such moments of crisis, people may ask, "How could God let this happen?" Because we proclaim that God is good and all-powerful, loss causes some people to question the goodness of God, the power of God, even the existence of God.

St. Paul gives his answer in our second reading, an eloquent passage from his Letter to the Romans. He calls God's judgments inscrutable and God's ways unsearchable. Paul's answer to "How could God let something happen?" is God knows the answer, and you don't. That does not satisfy everyone, but Paul states this to conclude the part of his letter where he acclaims God's new covenant with both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's own Jewish brothers and sisters were wondering, "How could God allow Gentiles into our covenant?" It was a crisis of faith.

Paul usually presents arguments in cool, logical ways; here, he reaches beyond reason: Of course we do not completely understand God; if we did, God would not be God. Still, we want explanations. God gave us an intellect. Shouldn't God help us use it to untangle the conundrums of life, the puzzles of human tragedy or religious belief?

Paul then leads the Romans beyond logic into mystery. He opens with three ways we experience God's depth: God has riches, wisdom and knowledge. Then Paul poses three questions drawn from Isaiah and Job that address this threefold depth in reverse order: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" is a question about knowledge. "Who has been his counselor?" asks about wisdom. And "Who has given the Lord anything that he may be repaid?" is a question about God's riches. God manages everything, including discernment and details. Paul concludes that God has answers that human minds cannot grasp.

Some people with the question "How could God let this happen?" regard Paul's answer, "It's a mystery," as inadequate, even a cop-out. They may say, "I could accept what is happening to me if I only knew why." Sometimes we do ultimately appreciate the blessings that result from a crisis. Other times we may not ever know why, and our accepting of a crisis may not be God's priority.

Some grow angry with God when his actions seem wrong or mean. Paul takes a different path: When he does not understand what God is doing, he delights in the depth of God's riches, wisdom and knowledge. Paul is comfortable not knowing all the answers because he cannot know them all. He decides in the end to give glory to God, and he hopes his Jewish readers will do the same.

Paul would surely want the same from us. The unanswerable questions of life are but a window into the depth of God's riches, wisdom and knowledge. Some people get angry; some disbelieve. But all hard questions are opportunities to probe a deep mystery and to give God glory.

Sunday, August 23, 2020