

**SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**JUNE 9<sup>TH</sup>, 2024**

**JOHN 9: 1-38**

**“TRYING TO FIGURING OUT WHY PEOPLE SUFFER”**

A little baby becomes ill, suffers for a time, and then dies. A friend gets struck down with cancer. A tornado whips through a town and many are killed..... Why do such things happen? Why is it allowed by God? Big questions that everyone struggles with.

In today's gospel lesson from John 9, we heard about a situation like these. Our Lord and the Disciples come upon a man born blind. That is especially bad because that means he had never seen *anything*: not his mother's face, not the sun in the sky, none of the beauty of nature. All he had ever known was total darkness. The Disciples wonder about why this had happened. They assume it was some kind of punishment from God but wonder who was getting punished for what. As we read in John 9:2-----“And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned---this man or his parents that he was born blind?’”

Christ replies that it was not a punishment of either the man or his parents. It was not a punishment at all. Jesus said in verse 3: “It was not that this man sinned, or that his parents sinned, but so that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” The Lord is clear in His words---the blindness was not a punishment for anyone's sin. Instead, it happened to reveal the glory of God. And in the story of the healing of this man in today's gospel reading, God's glory was truly revealed!

Suffering can have good results, like in today's reading. Once there was a man who was the only survivor of a shipwreck. He washed up on a little desert island, known to no one. A bit like Robinson Crusoe. There he managed to survive. All he had was a primitive little hut he made out of driftwood. It wasn't much but it was hugely valuable to him because it gave him shelter from the sun and from the rain. It wasn't much but it was his home and he cherished it. One morning after cooking a little something over his campfire he went off to hunt for food. When he returned to his hut, it was burning down. Sparks from his campfire had blown on the hut, and smoldered while he was gone---and now it was fully ablaze with smoke pouring into the sky. He broke down and fell on the ground weeping. He cried out in anguish, “Why, God? Why?” Then before long, as he sat on the sand in utter misery, he saw a ship on the distant horizon. And it was heading his way! With joy, he greeted the landing party as they stepped out of their little boat onto the shore and he asked, “How did you ever find me?” They replied, “We were on our course not too many miles away and we saw smoke over here---and so here we are! What a good idea that was that you had----to send up a smoke signal for rescuers to see!” (“Great Stories”, Oct.-Dec., 1998) Yes, our sufferings, our disasters---they can be a blessing that God uses to help us.

It is clear in the Bible that our sufferings are sometimes a punishment for sin. But it also clear, especially in Jesus' words in today's gospel lesson, that that is not always the case--- sometimes there is no punishment at all involved. Sometimes suffering is for our own good. And sometimes it is to show the glory of God, like in today's story.

Often we don't know the reason bad things happen. Often, we are like the Disciples and can't figure it out. It just stays a mystery to us. That is when we have to strive to keep our faith in God---faith that even in the midst of suffering God is still with us, that He still loves us.

A man had a bad fall many decades ago before much surgery could be done. He broke his back and no operation was possible. He had to spend the rest of his life in bed with nearly total paralysis. A friend came to visit him and help as much as he could. As they talked, the visitor asked, "Does the devil ever tempt you to give up on God, and decide that God doesn't love you?" The bedridden man replied, "Yes, he tempts me to be angry at God every day. He whispers to me---"if Christ loves you, why do you have to suffer so much?" Then I point to the crucifix on my wall and say to him, "Look at the cross and see how much the Lord loves me!' And Satan runs away." ("Our Daily Bread", 11/24/80)

Sometimes we can understand why suffering takes place. But sometimes we can't. When we can't, we should remember Jesus Christ. Perfectly innocent, yet He suffered horribly on the cross. And it was all for us. We should let our sufferings remind us of how He suffered for us. And remembering His love for us will help us to be at peace even in the hardest times.

And through the process of drawing closer to God because of our sufferings, we will be blessed, we will grow in Christ. St. Paisios, the modern Greek Saint, said that after we die, when we open up our eyes in the new life ahead of us---the first thing we will do is to give thanks to God for all the troubles and problems He allowed us to have in this life. Because we will then realize how our sufferings brought us to God and salvation. (in Inner River, Kyriacus Markides, Image Press, 2012, p. 275)

For our hardships to help us, to draw us closer to God, we have to strive to increase our faith---faith that God really is in control; faith that our sadnesses and troubles are part of his plan to help us. Our lives sometimes seem like chaos, even misery. But God can bring beauty out of chaos. Maybe He will do so in the "here and now". For sure, He will do so in the life to come. So when we can't understand, we should still keep the faith and cling closer to God. We should keep believing that all will be well.

Suffering and pain come to us and to those we love. Sometimes we can figure out why. Often, we just can't. But even as we wonder why, we should cling to two truths:

---God is always in control

---God still loves us and always will, of which we are reminded each time we see a cross.

May we always give thanks to God and trust Him!