

4th Sunday of Lent – B
22 March 2009

We've all heard the expression, "If I had a nickel for every time someone asked me that, I'd be rich!" Well, today's 1st reading makes me think of that saying: if I had a nickel for every time someone asked me, "Father, why is God punishing me like this?" I'd be a RICH man!"

I know I think this often – God, why are you punishing me like this? I think it every time I walk into the house and Farley has eaten another book! Despite that "iron clad" legal agreement (the lawyer) drew up for me – Farley is STILL eating books and licking utensils! Why is God punishing me like this?!

Certainly, I don't make light of what is for many a *serious* question. Many times, we DO feel like all that I'm suffering, all that I'm going through MUST be some punishment from God for something.

- ✍ This is certainly what the Israelites thought.
- ✍ They were God's chosen and special people
- ✍ but again and again they were exiles, their temple destroyed, their people killed...
- ✍ WHERE IS GOD? They asked.

Let's look at this a bit.

- ✍ God is all-holy, and so, God cannot tolerate sin – in fact He abhors it!
- ✍ God is indignant when he sees sins being committed, especially when they are committed by those who have freely entered into a covenant with Him – those whom He has **surrounded** with His kind and protective love!
- ✍ This is truly offensive to God – and God is offended by it!
- ✍ That's what we pray over and over during the stations by St. Alphonsus – "I love you, Jesus, my love. I repent of ever having offended you. Never permit me to offend you again."
- ✍ Our sins are offensive to God.

BUT – God does not punish us because of our sins! God **holds back** His anger. He is always ready to forgive at just the very first sign of repentance. God never abandons those who turn away from Him.

In fact, God goes after them! Without waiting a moment – as soon as someone has strayed, He sends messengers to them, begging that they return to His grace.

Since the beginning – since the Original Sin in the Garden – God has been calling us back – and not only calling us – but giving us the WAY to come back – What does St. John tell us in today’s Gospel? “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

Yet, there is a logical connection between sin and punishment for sin.

- ✍ Who would God be if He were to be indifferent to the abominations committed against Him?
- ✍ Perhaps the “open line” comments are not that far off – is God punishing our nation for having removed Him from our schools and for all the ways that we turn away from His Commandments?

- ✍ Crime;
- ✍ murder in the name of “freedom of choice;”
- ✍ crushing debts;
- ✍ unjust laws;
- ✍ immoral presidential policies;
- ✍ a depraved moral and social code;
- ✍ acceptance of anything “as long as it doesn’t hurt me;”

these are all ways that we are scandalized by how far we, as a culture, have wandered from God’s laws.

But there is a problem.

- ✍ On one hand, who can really say that God is “punishing” us for our sins?
- ✍ Remember that one day Jesus reacted against this simplistic interpretation.
 - The disciples were asking Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”
 - Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.”
- ✍ We have to be careful about making judgments like this – saying that all the evil that comes to us, all the hardships and suffering are the result of God’s punishment for sin.
- ✍ Jesus taught us that God doesn’t work that way!

In today's 1st reading, the Book of Chronicles, which tells the history of the Jewish people, they were certainly convinced that the Exile, the destruction of the Temple were all God's punishments. But, they also speak of the preaching of the prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel – who God kept sending to them – warning them and urging them to conversion. But, the people didn't listen – in fact, they persecuted the prophets!

This makes me think of our situation today – the Church has been warning our world that we are headed down the wrong path

- ✍ whether it be our consumerism,
- ✍ our unjust wars,
- ✍ our moral errors –

and our world simply ignores the Church – WE are the ones bringing God's message of repentance – calling people to return to God – and we are persecuted and ridiculed for it.

Just this week, the Holy Father (who is making a pastoral visit to Cameron, African) said that condoms were not the way to solve the AIDS epidemic – and he was LAUGHED at by every major new organization – INCLUDING Rush Limbaugh. But he is right! He gave us the answer – faithfulness, strengthening of marriage, abstinence, commitment – all Christian values which lead to healthier marriages and a life without AIDS. But rather than heeding a “call to conversion,” the Holy Father is laughed at for his “antiquated” way of thinking. How sad. God is giving us the answer – and all we can do is laugh.

The ancient Israelites, recognized that all they suffered (the Exile and the destruction of the temple) were ways that God was calling them to conversion

- ✍ they were ways that God was calling them to repentance
- ✍ to return to faithfulness – to return to Him.
- ✍ For them, they realized that the “punishment” God thrust upon them was to good purpose and came to a good result (in this case) through King Cyrus whom God inspired to call all the people back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

The things we suffer in this life are all invitations to return to God – to embrace our daily cross and follow after Him.

This year, our parish is focusing on the Stations of the Cross – and here is a great connection between this idea of “God is punishing me” and the 2nd station – Jesus accepts His cross.

What did Jesus do to deserve this punishment? What did He do to deserve death? Nothing. He ALWAYS followed and obeyed God – he NEVER wandered from God. But He, like many of us, probably had every right to ask “God, why are you punishing me like this?!”

But Jesus’ acceptance of this “punishment” – of His cross – was so that he could be “lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (as we heard in the Gospel).

God is not a God of punishment – but, as Pope Benedict reminded us in his 1st encyclical: “God is Love!” He showed us His love when He sent His Son into the world so that we could have life through Him.

God’s intent on “punishing” His own Son with death, was salvation – for those who believe in Him. The bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the desert was the answer to their predicament – but they had to look up at it. Those who refused to look at it – did NOT recover – and they died. God didn’t condemn them, He gave them the remedy – they condemned themselves because THEY didn’t take the gift that God offered them.

Jesus was given to the world as the remedy for all our ills and trials

- ✍ He was raised up on the cross,
- ✍ but whether or not we’ll be saved is up to us.
- ✍ The offer is there – do we accept it?
- ✍ Like Jesus accepting His cross in the 2nd Station – do we respond to the call to conversion?
- ✍ Do WE respond to Jesus’ call to live the commandments?
- ✍ Do we accept the trials, the struggles, the “punishments” God allows us to undergo – knowing that they ALL lead us to salvation?

- ✍ Sometimes the things we suffer are the direct result of our sins (the financial “mess” our country is in is probably the direct result of sinful behavior).

- ✍ Sometime the things we suffer are the result of someone else's sin (the person hit and injured by a drunk driver).
- ✍ Sometimes the things we suffer are the result of our own sins (the person who suffers terrible psychological torment because of a decision to have an abortion many years ago).

But the KEY to all of it is:

- ✍ God allows them all to happen (whether they are our own fault or not) because through them, God's glory can be seen – if we accept them with patience – as Jesus accepted the cross.

Why are we “punished by God?” So that through them, we can be called to repentance. So that through them, “God might be visible.”

If we're always asking ourselves, “Why is God doing this to me” – we're asking the wrong question. The better questions would be,

- ✍ “How does God want me to deal with this, so that He will be visible in my life?
- ✍ In what ways is God using this as an opportunity to encourage me to repent and return to Him?

God is EVER faithful. He is ALWAYS with us.

- ✍ Can we do what it takes, when we think we're being “punished,” to place ourselves into God's hands – knowing that He will bring us through?

Whoever looks up at the cross and recognizes the great love God has for us, accepts their own cross – has begun their own “way of the cross” – and is surely on the road to Calvary – which is the only way to the resurrection.

God isn't punishing you – God is calling you to turn to Him – to trust in Him – to accept your own cross – and in it, to recognize God at your side.