

Roy and HG's SBS commentary and show with full oompah band of the ashes tours in England, became famous owing to a particular ditty played by the band every time an Australian player or coach or commentator tried to blame their poor form on something or someone else- which would be quickly followed up with full oompah band backing *Its Un-Australian not to blame someone.....*

Jesus was in a difficult conversation on a very complex issue. The subject was causality. Why do certain things happen? It can and often is argued that there is a reason for everything. If that is true, how does one discern the reason? What is the cause/effect relationship? Was that just an accident, a serendipitous confluence of human behaviour with the laws of nature or did God cause it to happen? And if God caused it, why did God do that?

Without providing a comprehensive understanding, today's gospel touches on a tiny slice of causality. The topic is introduced in Luke 12:54-56. To paraphrase, Jesus said to the crowd, "Everyone knows the causes of weather. When dark clouds come from the Mediterranean Sea in the west, you know rain will likely follow. Dark clouds cause rain. When a strong breeze blows from the south, you know it is going to be hot that day. Wind from the south in Palestine causes a scorching day. You know about weather. Why don't you understand what causes things to happen to people?"

In my humble opinion, the best answer to Jesus' question is that "we know how the weather works because it is easy to understand basic weather. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in meteorology to work out that when dark clouds appear, rain is likely. That is very different from discerning why the righteous suffer, why the wicked prosper, why bad things happen to good people, or why good people do bad things.

Without acknowledging the complex and mysterious nature of human causalities, in the first verses of Luke 13, people in Jesus' audience try their hand at naming the cause of a recent event. As best we can piece the incident together, a group of Galileans had been on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. At the great temple, these people participated in the regular ritual animal sacrifices. Somehow they crossed Pontius Pilate. The Roman governor dispatched a squad of soldiers to slaughter the pilgrims. As Luke's gospel puts it, "At that time there were some present (in the crowd) who told him (Jesus) about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (v. 1).

That event, of course, would have made front page headlines in the Galilean Daily News: "Pontius Pilate Slaughters Ten Galileans." Everybody in town would have been talking about it. People would have wanted to know how and why it happened. It is logical to conclude that the chatter would have been rampant. Luke does not say specifically, but apparently one of the theories floating around Galilee was that the victims were responsible for their own deaths: "They must have all been evil people. God used the Romans to punish them for their sins."

When Jesus heard this gossipy explanation he said to the crowd, "Do you (really) think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."(vv. 1-5).

Obviously, Jesus was not impressed by the argument that the best way to identify sinners was to see who got killed by a falling tower or by Pontius Pilate. (To paraphrase) “No, I tell you,” Jesus said, “there is no cause/effect relationship between being one of the worst sinners in Galilee and having your blood mingled with the blood of sacrificed animals, and you cannot explain the deaths of eighteen killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed by concluding those people were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem. God does not work that way and there is no law of the natural world that holds bad people can always be identified by the terrible things that happen to them. It just does not work that way.”

Even twenty centuries later we hear echoes of this erroneous thinking. One morning a few years ago at Connecticut’s Sandy Hook Elementary School, a deeply disturbed young man used three semi-automatic firearms to murder twenty small children and six adults. Before the outrage and grief could be fully exhausted, the internet crackled with comments about how parents and school officials were really the ones at fault.

They had just not adequately protected the school or the children. A few even commented that they believed that if the teachers had been armed, this would not have happened. No, I tell you. It was not the fault of those Galileans in Jerusalem that they were killed by Roman soldiers and it was not the school or the parents who were responsible for the deaths at Sandy Hook Elementary School. That is simply not the way it works.

On September 11, 2001, commercial airliners were intentionally crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. It was part of a wider coordinated attack that day by al-Qaeda, an Islamic international terrorist network. When the tower at Siloam fell eighteen people were killed. When the towers at the World Trade Centre collapsed nearly 3,000 people died. The victims were as diverse as millionaire investment bankers on the middle floors, Low wage restaurant workers on the top floor, and first responding firefighters in the lobby. All of them were there just to do their jobs.

Two days later, on September 13, two right wing television evangelists broadcast their analysis to the nation. They were essentially in agreement when one said, “God has lifted the curtain and has allowed the enemies of America to give us what we probably deserve.”(1) Then the two made a list of incidents, people, causes, and organisations that they were certain had “made God mad” and therefore had to share the blame for the attack.

No, I tell you, it doesn’t work that way. It was wrong to conclude that a tower falling in Siloam had something to do with God’s punishment for sinfulness. It is equally wrong to conclude that a falling tower in lower Manhattan had something to do with God’s punishment for sinfulness. God does not work that way.

To say that, of course, begs the question, “If not by dropping a tower on them, how does God deal with sinful people?” That issue is important for every one of us. After all, we are all included in the category of sinful people. As Paul put it, “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22b-23). The inquiring mind should want to know how God deals with our having sinned and have fallen short of God’s glory. Jesus anticipated that turn in the conversation so he told the parable of the barren fig tree:

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and

still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." (Luke 13:6-9)

Notice what is happening in this story. A backyard fig tree has yet to produce figs. The owner suggests giving up and cutting the tree down. The gardener suggests another way. Give it more time and a little tender loving care. Loosen the soil and apply some fertiliser. Give it another year. If it still doesn't produce figs, the option of cutting it down will still be available.

Rather than offering a benign smile and nod and moving to the next question, Jesus turned the focus, content, and tone of this conversation upside down and inside out. This ceased being a chat about whether or not total strangers had been killed as punishment for their sinfulness. Now it was a conversation about how God dealt with all sinners — including and, perhaps especially, the sinners in his audience.

What Jesus said is that rather than dropping towers on those who have failed to live up to God's standards, we are given another chance. In response to our miserable failings, God offers radical grace. We experience the grace as a loosening of the hard-packed soil around our hearts. God deals with us sinners, not by dropping a tower on us, but by giving us a big dose of unconditional love. This is radical grace as another chance, a new opportunity. The Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr put it so well: "Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change... is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change."(2)

The tone of this conversation is now different. No longer does it feel as though dark stormy clouds of judgment are gathering. No longer is there a hot wind of hades blowing. Now there seems to be a cool gentle breeze and a bright blue sky. That is the difference Jesus makes. As Richard Rohr put it, "The true gospel is always fresh air and breathing room." And for that radical grace of another change, we give thanks. Amen and Amen.

Fr Robert Newton

- 1) Conversation between Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, The PTL Club, September 13, 2001
-also on YouTube TM
- 2) Richard Rohr, Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2011, p. 138.