

I saw one of those *Far Side*-type cartoons a while back that showed Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. From a dark cloud overhead, a huge arm - presumably belonging to God - extended down from the sky. The index finger of the hand was directing the first couple toward the exit. But as this was happening, Adam spoke to God and said, "Can I have a doggie bag for the rest of the apple?" The caption below the cartoon read, "Adam really, really missed the point."

It seems to me that some similar caption could be applied to the behaviour of James and John in the incident recorded in today's Gospel Reading. These disciple brothers tell Jesus they want him to do something for them. When he asks what that is, they tell him that when he comes into his glory, they wish to sit on his right and left, the places of highest honour. This request shows that James and John had really, really missed the point. I say that because three times in the weeks preceding this incident, Jesus had plainly told the disciples that he was going to be made to suffer and be killed. In fact, the last of those three conversations took place only minutes before James and John made their outlandish request. That they asked what they asked showed that despite Jesus' straightforward report of what was to occur, they had only heard what they wanted to hear. They blocked out everything that didn't fit in with their dreams of glory.

Had they listened better, they would have realised that when Jesus talked of glorifying God, he meant that he was going to do it by going to the cross. And those places on his right and left? Those were crosses also, and they ended up being occupied by common thieves. Jesus responded to the brothers by telling them that they would indeed "drink the cup" that he was to drink from, which was a metaphorical way of saying that they too would suffer, but as to who sat on his right and left, Jesus told them, "It is not mine to grant."

Now that statement might give us pause. Was Jesus saying that his power was limited? If Jesus is indeed the Son of God, then why wouldn't he be able to assign the places of honour in the coming kingdom of heaven? Jesus, however, was not speaking about any inability on his part, but about how the kingdom of God operates. Jesus has the power of heaven at his disposal, but God has fashioned the world so that some things can only come to us by what we undergo and what we take away from those experiences. When he said the positions of honour were not his to give, he was saying that such things do not come by his appointment, but by our achievement ... or by our suffering.

Where this comes down for us is when we consider what we pray for. Suppose you petition God, saying, "Lord, make me a more compassionate person." God has so constructed us that we do not become more caring because God throws a switch somewhere. Rather, compassion often results from personal experience with pain. Some of the most compassionate people I know are those who have suffered deeply themselves. Apparently, from what they have been through personally, they have gleaned an understanding that makes them very empathetic with others who are suffering. If God were to respond verbally to our request to be made more compassionate, he might say something like, "Compassion is not mine to give. The only way I can answer your prayer is by letting you learn from the hard experiences of life. Are you willing to learn?"

Or suppose you pray, "O God, give me gladness." Our Creator has so made us that the only way to gladness is through the problems and struggles of life and the appreciation that comes afterward. And when we ask for patience — just think what we must go through to gain that! None of these things are God's to give unless we will receive them in the way he has prescribed.

I am not suggesting that God purposely sends us trouble to improve our character or answer our prayers, but I am saying that God has built a certain kingdom economy into life so that when difficulties come upon us, we are still able to draw value from them. That is a way of saying that God is bigger than our pains and problems.

In writing to the Romans, Paul refers to the matter of suffering that comes to people in the course of being faithful to God. His comment illustrates directly the strange economy of God's kingdom, an economy that does not let the experiences of those who trust God go to waste. Paul said, "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts ..." (Romans 5:3-5). Now that kind of testimony only works if the environment in which it is uttered is under the ultimate control of someone who cares about us. If the world is just the result of random action or is in the control of an evil force, then to say that we can boast in sufferings because of the good that comes from them is bravado at best or more likely, outright foolishness. But if the world in which we experience suffering is under the ultimate control of a loving God, then the witness that good can be gleaned even from pain and suffering has the ring of truth about it.

As we look at the hard and troubled experiences of our lives, it would be a misunderstanding to say that they only seemed to be bad but are really good things in disguise - or that God made us go through them for our own good. *Bad things are really bad, not good.* The terror and pain they cause is real and the harm from our troubles often leaves permanent scars.

But can we hear the deeper message in Jesus' reply to James and John and come to a place where we can see that the purposes of God are not thwarted by the evils of other people and pains of existence? I don't believe for a moment that God makes bad things happen to us so that we will harvest some good out of them. The Lord is a God of love, not of torture. But he is also a God of redemption and power. He sometimes takes the pain of our lives and says, in effect, "Yes, it was a bad thing, and I didn't send it on you, but now look at what good things I can make for you out of it."

So what this suggests to us is that instead of praying, "Lord, give me this," or "Lord, grant me that," we should pray, "Lord, here are the pieces of my life that don't make sense, the broken pieces of my life, the frayed edges, the rough spots, the pain and the unbroken parts as well. Make what you will of them, in that strange but loving economy of your kingdom."

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