

## Homily for Trinity XIX

+ I think it is safe to say that we live in a time of immense psychological tension. On the one hand, at least those of us who are lucky to inhabit what is sometime called “the developed” part of the world—that is, technologically and economically developed—can reasonably claim to have it better off than any other population in the recorded history of Earth. Material prosperity abounds, ever more effectively delivered. A library of the world's collected history, science, philosophy, news, and art, as well as an interactive portal to the ongoing discussion of all things human, with access to endless entertainments of every conceivable quality, can now be carried in the pocket. Medicine promises continued advances, already impressive in comparison to the state of ages past, against disease and discomfort. Things have never been better, according to a certain set of measurements.

Yet, there is something rotten in the state of Denmark, to quote Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Despite comforts and conveniences, there is a palpable sense of rupture and of corruption, of the loss of good faith, and a disintegration of human community. Perhaps a good amount of this collective uneasiness can be laid at the feet of the shape our media of communications have taken, as accessible, ubiquitous, and unrelenting as they are sensationalist, divisive, and engaged in constant fear-mongering. Demonization of those with whom one disagrees, mob-like tribalism, a social dialectic whose currency is raw emotion—combine these things with the collapse of any shared system of moral value, of an agreement about what constitutes the good life, and we have something that any sane person recognizes as broken. Yet sanity itself is in short supply. The hard science provides data, accounting both for increased reporting and greater willingness to seek help, that our mental and psychological health is in significant decline.

Perhaps the weight of tragedy, atrocity, of distrust, of moral and political corruption, of polarizing animosity between erstwhile fellow-citizens, is simply too much to bear. The center cannot hold. But consider that our anxieties are not a novel phenomenon in human history. The Old Testament book of *Job* is widely held by biblical scholars to contain some of the oldest material in the Hebrew religious tradition, very likely earlier than even the five books of Moses. Belonging to the category of “wisdom literature,” the book tells the story of a righteous man who is handed over by God to be tempted by the Devil, who contends that Job's righteousness and fidelity is simply the by-product of good fortune. Take his material prosperity, his family, and his good name away, Satan contends with God, and this man will curse you. God allows the experiment to proceed, and every conceivable tragedy befalls Job. His sons and daughters are killed in freak accidents, his wealth is obliterated by theft, and Job himself is afflicted with disease. The majority of the book of Job consists of a series of conversations between the title character and a number of friends who come, ostensibly, to comfort him, as together they argue about the mysteries of sin, of suffering, of righteousness, and of Divine providence. In the end, God himself speaks in answer to Job.

It is not an easy book to read—it contains, in concentrated form, a theme that runs at intervals throughout the Old Testament, especially in the psalms and the prophets. It is the cry of confusion and of pain, in the words of the forty-fourth psalm: “Up, Lord, why sleepest thou? Awake, and be not absent from us for ever. Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our misery and trouble? For our soul is brought low, even unto the dust; our belly cleaveth unto the ground. Arise, and help us, and deliver us, for thy mercy's sake.” From this place of humiliation and misfortune, Job wonders aloud:

Why, seeing times are not hidden from the Almighty, do they that know him not see his days? Some remove the landmarks; they violently take away flocks, and feed thereof. They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow's ox for a pledge. They turn the needy out of the way: the poor of the earth hide themselves together. Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness yieldeth

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food for them and for their children. They reap every one his corn in the field: and they gather the vintage of the wicked. They cause the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of a shelter. They pluck the fatherless from the breast, and take a pledge of the poor. They cause him to go naked without clothing, and they take away the sheaf from the hungry; Which make oil within their walls, and tread their wine presses, and suffer thirst. Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them. They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. The murderer rising with the light killeth the poor and needy, and in the night is as a thief. The eye also of the adulterer waiteth for the twilight, saying, No eye shall see me: and disguiseth his face. In the dark they dig through houses, which they had marked for themselves in the daytime: they know not the light. For the morning is to them even as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death.

In the anguish of his loss and his humiliation, Job thus turns his eyes to the human condition and sees—and perhaps we can forgive him if, given what has happened, the negatives tend to stand out—a system of corruption, exploitation, injustice, and moral wrong. Atrocity on top of atrocity. The wicked in prosperity. The poor and the needy cowering under the terrors those whose very presence is as the shadow of death.

This is what sin is. We are accustomed, and not without some warrant, to think of sin primarily in terms of individual and moral choice. Sin is that thing we did, or said, which we know to have been evil, and which keeps us up at nights years afterwards. This is not wholly inaccurate, but certainly not the whole picture. Human sin is much more than a set of individual trespasses of moral principles, it also describes that entire system of human existence that comes to be as the aggregate result of these violations—the complex webs of broken or bent relationships, alliances of falsehood and neglect, of willful blindness and calculated cruelty, perpetuated across the generations. “Why do they that know Almighty God,” Job cries out in the face of this horror, “not see His days?” Behind this combined prayer and accusation is the knowledge that we are simply in too deep to extricate ourselves. No amount of social engineering, of crafted policy, of activism, can shake off what goes down to the bone. That would be like asking a paralyzed man to get up and walk.

The comedian Rowan Atkinson does a bit, in which he impersonates an Anglican vicar who takes some liberties, we shall say, in reading out the established text of the gospels. Poking fun at the language of the King James in our gospel passage this morning, in which a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing—in older English, “one sick of the palsy,”—Atkinson's clergyman exclaims, “If I had to lie around on a cot all day long, I'd be pretty sick of the palsy too!” All joking aside, as an image of a broken and sinful—quite literally, full of sin—humanity, even Mr. Bean's pun on the suffering man is not quite wide of the mark. We are both sick, and as Job's anguished cry to God is evidence, sick of being sick.

Jesus Christ does not misidentify that sickness. All the purely physical tragedy that can afflict us pales in comparison to that deeply rooted spiritual corruption, not unlike a paralysis of the soul, that infects the human condition. It is the spiritual sickness that he first addresses: “Be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee.” If He is not who He claims to be, in word and in deed, this is truly blasphemous—for it is a claim to eradicate the disease, to free a human from the bonds of sin, of Satan, and from the shadow of death. We are told in the other gospel accounts that those who stood by reasoned in their hearts, “only God can forgive sins,” and they are not wrong. The healing must come from God. When Christ challenges his critics: “which is easier to say, thy sins be forgiven thee, or 'rise up and walk?’” and then heals the paralyzed man, the point He is making is that the physical healing is easier. By demonstrating mastery over the health of the body, He is making the stronger claim of mastery over the soul. Those who saw it marvelled, we are told, and glorified God that he had given such power to men. Did they rightly identify the true miracle? If they did not, nevertheless, we must.

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For it is into this ministry of spiritual healing that we are summoned as members of the body of Christ, who have put off, through Him, the old man, which was corrupt, and have put on the new, that is, Christ Himself, which after God—that is, according to His renewed image in us—has been re-created in righteousness and true holiness. The evidence that God has come, in the flesh, to redeem His people, to deliver them from sin—this is a truth that must be apprehended by the world through the witness of the Church, where bitterness, wrath, anger, and clamour, and evil speaking are put away, with all malice, and where our kindness and charity toward one another are evident in our own ministry of forgiveness, the imitation of and outworking of the work of Christ our Lord for us. As we approach the altar this morning, the sacrament and symbol of that health which is given us by God in Christ, we pray that His Holy Spirit will so direct and rule our hearts. Amid the ruin and paralysis of sin, may we who know the Almighty God in the Person of His Son, demonstrate that we have seen, indeed that we live in His days. +Amen.