

At a first reading, or hearing, this is a pretty straightforward story, at least for the gospels. A person presents to Jesus with an obvious need which neither he nor anyone else is able to tend to, and Jesus heals him. This seems to be a particular instance of what has been spoken of quite generally in a couple of summaries of Jesus' ministry up to this point. We might perhaps have questions about this kind of healing, along the lines of "did it really happen as reported", but I don't intend to address those directly today.

Instead I'd like to look to another "issue" which might arise from stories like this: why is the man sick in the first place? A question like this opens up a can of worms which is probably beyond anyone's capacity to contain, yet we can't therefore simply cast the question aside, especially in the light of what has been experienced by so many in this past week.¹ An answer to the "why?" question will ultimately elude us; but we can still discover something about ourselves, and God, in thinking about why we ask "why?".

"Why?" questions reflect presumptions we have about order and reason – the thought that things happen because of something else. When those other reasons or causes are laid forth, we hope to have come to an understanding as to why this or that has happened. Curiously, the story of the leper gives us no insight as to the "why". The man is simply a leper, and unable to do anything about it. We might be able to offer reasons as to his leprosy, although even today they're not much different from those people of his own time would have offered: he has leprosy – or whatever precise thing it is his suffers – because he has caught it from someone else.

This doesn't help very much in the "why?" stakes, although it does have some consequences for health policy. It doesn't help, because it simply moves the problem one step deeper: why is there leprosy at all, that others might come to catch it? Simply explaining that a person is sick because of bacteria or a virus, or because she has spent time in a certain place or with certain people does nothing more than push the question as to "why?" back a further step.

But cause-and-effect arguments do make a difference in terms of health policy because the fact that such diseases are usually communal means that infected persons are best isolated from the rest of the community. And this is, in fact, what is mandated in the health regulations of the Old Testament. To suffer from this kind of condition is to be required to isolate yourself from everyone else, and to announce your condition to all by crying out "unclean" as you approach others. But even here no meaning is given to his condition – it has no "sense", no deeper reason or rationality, just because we've made a response to it.

Ultimately, what happens to us, for ill or for good, is quite inscrutable. Because of that meaninglessness, because our suffering is inscrutable, we tend to focus more on policy. When something has gone wrong, the best sense we can make of it is to recognise it as something we might be able to prevent from happening again. The social isolation of lepers is one simple version of this; the effects of such disease is minimised by this policy. The building of a safety fence on a bridge is another.² Developing guidelines for responding to bushfire threats is another.

But there is a strong tendency in us then to turn violation of policy into the meaning of human suffering. The "meaning" of suffering, or the reason for it, becomes someone's failure to observe the rules. The meaning of suffering is, then, that others have failed us: not good enough sanitation or handling of infectious diseases, not enough safety measures in dangerous places, not enough warning, or the wrong advice, or poor maintenance of power lines, or simply mistaking our own capacities in the face of such a dire threat as the enormous fires which have wrought such destruction among us this week.

Suffering now has a meaning or explanation, which is that others have caused our pain, that others have failed us or, more rarely, that we have failed ourselves. Yet, as quickly as we move to this kind of thinking – and it appeared very quickly in this last week – it still doesn't really get to the heart of the matter of why such failure can happen and affect us in such devastating ways. This is simply the closest that the secular mind can get to thinking about the things that afflict us. We are fundamentally creatures of the law, and we look to policy and regulation to protect us from each other and nature, as much as is possible. And the best we can do when things go wrong is point at each other.

But inadequate as that way of explaining our suffering might be, perhaps it is preferable to the attempts of some believers to make sense of suffering. We all long to live in a rational world, a world which makes sense; and believers are no different in this. Because we intuitively recognise that much of what happens to us doesn't seem to make sense, we either have to live with the meaninglessness of what we suffer, and so perhaps of all that we experience, or, if we are believers, we might invoke God as the guarantee of the rationality of all which happens.

When we can't otherwise make sense of it, we'll sometimes hear from well-meaning believers – perhaps evening repeating it ourselves – that "it's all part of God's plan". This is not simply a statement which springs from theological thinking or scriptural texts, it

² In relation, for example, to the death of Darcey Freeman at the hands of her father, thrown from the Westgate Bridge in Melbourne, February 2009.

¹ That is, the Victorian February 7 2009 bushfires.

rises up in us to meet the need for order: "even if I can't see the order, I believe that God can; God is in control, this is part of God's plan". There are some hints here and there in the Scriptures which suggest that this might be so,³ but they fade in comparison to statements about the fundamental disorder of the world, and God's work on bringing it to order. What an odd, even hideous, image of God we lay forth when we declare that God orders the world such that this or that disaster or tragedy is a necessary thing. What a strange thing we make God out to be, in order to maintain order and reason in our suffering.

Of all people, the Christian should be the one who is least concerned about the meaninglessness of so much which happens. The crucifixion of Jesus ought to be the lesson to us that God's good plans do not always prevail in the world, and that, in fact, disorder usually prevails. We have become so used to Easter Sunday that we have missed that Good Friday is a disaster: the final outworking of the failure of Adam and Eve in the Garden, the incapacity of the world to recognise or embrace God in our midst. We have learned to say that Jesus "had" to die, that Jesus' death was part of God's "plan". But it's all rather less ordered and rational than this. The gospel is not that God has "plans" in which Jesus or any one of us is a pawn, available for advancement or for sacrifice according to God's plan. This would not be good news but divine terrorism. The gospel is that, when God's good plans go awry in this fractured world, there may still be hope; things may still be retrieved; finally, there might be a restoration, where there are no more partings, and every tear is wiped away.

Good Friday is not so much about Jesus having to die as it is about Jesus simply dying; that he dies is scandal enough without making it part of God's greater purpose. For such a death has no meaning or purpose until God's light shines upon it; it is simply a death, as painful as death is for all it touches. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are accounts of the condition of the world, and what it truly takes to recognise that condition, and heal it.

So it is also for suffering of the leper in our story, and for us all when we are afflicted. There is much opportunity for others to respond, and this we must when we can. In our gospel reading Jesus responds to the disorder of the world by setting it right for this one person. But it is not simply a fixing up of a sick man. Whereas he is required by health policy to approach Jesus shouting, "Unclean, unclean", he simply approaches and asks that real order, real meaning, be made of his situation. Though Jesus is required not to touch him, in fact he does, again violating the health regulations.

But, perhaps more interestingly, there is a thread of anger in the story which our translators have hidden from us. What we heard today as Jesus being "moved by pity" is, in many old and important manuscripts, "moved by anger." And a little later, when Jesus sends the man away, what we heard as "Jesus, sternly warning him" could be translated as "Jesus, filled with indignation", or "greatly disturbed in spirit". It makes

³ Perhaps most famously, some readings of Jesus' words in John 9.

little sense for Jesus to be angry with the man. The clue seems to be in that Jesus sends the man to perform the ritual required of people healed of such diseases, and to do this as a "testimony" to the priests. It would seem that there is a challenge being thrown down to the priests, and perhaps even to the whole health code of Moses: dealing with suffering, and accounting for it, through regulation is inadequate, for it declares the mostly innocent somehow to be mostly guilty and causes them to pay the cost for things which are in fact much bigger than any of us could be blamed for.

There is no final accounting for what we suffer, unless it has to do with a fundamental disorder in the world which is beyond us to fix or even adequately to name. This being the case, there is no adequate response to such suffering which is not the response of a power which can actually break the grip of what holds us, and undo with its effects. Our hunt for guilty parties and our recriminations in the effort to make sense of what happens to us indicate only that we wish to make sense of our suffering.

The invitation of our reading this morning – indeed that of the whole of the gospel – is to listen here for a different telling of our story, for a different account of what ails us, and what might truly constitute meaning and healing. It is to look and wait for such a healing, that we too might come to be able to sing with the psalmist,

*You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy...*

Such joy comes only when Jesus himself comes, is made present among us, and we find ourselves touched by him. It comes only when the disorder which presses in upon us is cast in a new light – that of God's capacity to heal what is broken, and to restore us to a new wholeness.

And so, for all that affects us and weighs us down, let us tell this different story, being with Jesus intolerant of anything which diminishes the truth about what ails us, and moving forward looking to the promise that he brings this truth and, with it, the healing we desperately long for.

Amen.⁴

⁴ Preparation for this sermon was much informed by David B. Hart's essay, "Tsumani and Theodicy", First Things, March 2005. This is available online at http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=166, and commended for your consideration!